#249: The case for racial colorblindness (Coleman Hughes)

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and today's episode features Coleman Hughes.

Coleman is a young rising star who just graduated from college this past May, but he's already a well-established public intellectual, writing about topics such as race and social justice. He's a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, and writes for publications like the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and City Journal, and has his own podcast, Conversations with Coleman.

As you may have noticed, I don't talk a lot about race and social justice on this podcast or online. And that's mainly because I feel like these conversations usually produce... let's say, lots of heat and not much light. But I consider Coleman definitely an exception to that rule. I felt like our conversation was interesting and helped clarify my thinking about some issues that have been on my mind in this area, such as how to decide what counts as "racist," or why people disagree about whether the "colorblind" approach to race is a good ideal or not.

I really enjoyed our conversation and found it refreshingly nuanced, and as I said, clarifying. And I hope you'll agree. So here is my conversation with Coleman Hughes:

[transition]

Julia: Coleman, I wanted to talk about what you've called the "colorblind" ideal, this Martin Luther King vision of race not mattering. You've talked about how our society has been shifting away from colorblindness as an ideal, towards instead something that could be called "race consciousness," where race does and *should* matter.

So my first question is whether you feel like you understand the causes of that shift. Where did that come from?

Coleman: That's a great question. I don't fully understand the causes of the shift, but I've paid attention to how the shift occurred, and I think in truth the shift really started in the '60s. You can see that there was this consensus, at least amongst elites, in the early '60s riding on the back of Martin Luther King's rhetoric about somebody's character over the color of their skin.

And then, by '67 or '68 you see that the Black Power Movement becomes much more popular, and they explicitly reject the mainstream civil rights approach. And in a way I think the question is a little bit posed backwards...

Julia: Oh yeah?

Coleman: ... because, zooming out, politics of ethnicity and group identity tend to in general be appealing to people all over the world, and in any era in history.

So perhaps the question is not why Martin Luther King's colorblind ethic has sort of receded in the popular consciousness. The more interesting question might be why was it ever an elite consensus to begin with, given that the status quo of most human society is that your tribal identity matters a lot.

That's sort of the way that I think about it.

Julia: Do you think that fits with the trajectories of Western European countries? Because my off-the-cuff impression was that the MLK ideal is still much more dominant in Western Europe than it is in the US today -- which is not to say that they necessarily live up to it perfectly, but that that's the explicit ideal that they're aiming for, more than the US is at the moment.

Coleman: That may be true. I'm not sure I have a strong sense of whether that's true.

An important difference might be that even Western European societies I think have always, and to some extent continue to have, a sense that being say French or British -- it's just assumed that that's an ethnicity, that the country is also somewhat synonymous with an ethnicity. I guess France may be a bit of an exception to this because they have definitely embraced, at least nominally, the sense that if an African comes to France then you're just French. But they never had the idea of a melting pot, or the idea that being French is just an idea.

Whereas in America we've at least always paid lip service to the notion that being American is not synonymous with being a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. It's, you can come from anywhere and be an American, and you can be hyphenated as an American. Where there's been no idea of being a hyphenated Brit or a hyphenated Frenchman. They haven't had as much actual diversity for these problems to arise to begin with, much less an enslaved population within their own borders which has a historical memory of their oppression, and therefore creates all this tension.

All of that to say, many of the challenges we experience with race in America haven't been posed in many European countries, for reasons of historical contingency, and therefore it's hard to judge whether they're really more attached to the MLK ethic in a sense.

Does that make sense at all?

Julia: Yeah, it does. I mean it’s definitely not a nice neat comparison across countries.

Talking about causes of this shift away from the MLK ideal, I wanted to discuss Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is someone you’ve said is very underrated in terms of her impact on people’s thought. Because unlike many other maybe more famous intellectuals, she's actually changed the way tons of regular people outside of academia think about social justice.

Could you just summarize what Kimberlé Crenshaw's contribution is?

Coleman: Yeah. Kimberlé Crenshaw is a legal theorist who is associated with Harvard, and in the late 70s and early 80s she did some work in the then-burgeoning field of critical race theory, which has been enormously influential.

And probably the one idea that she's most known for is the idea of intersectionality. She wrote a paper arguing that sometimes discrimination against a particular group, say black women, is not synonymous with simply adding the discrimination that they experience as black people to the discrimination that they experience as women. That the discrimination they face can be more than the sum of its parts.

And she gave a very specific example of a case in which a particular company was found to be not guilty of discriminating against black women, because they could point to many black men that they had hired, thus exonerating them from the charge of race discrimination, and they could point to many white women that they had hired, exonerating them from the charge of sexism. But logically, you could still see how it would be possible that they're not hiring black women in particular, so that was her point.

A pretty narrow point actually -- and not a sort of mind-blowing, paradigm shifting point, I would argue, but a well-taken point nonetheless.

In the intervening years, intersectionality has become much more than it started out as in that paper, and Crenshaw herself has been quoted as criticizing people who use it as a whole encompassing thought system. But that's what it has become.

And not only that, it's become a very strong rubric of status in a particular subculture. I just graduated from Columbia University last May, and I can attest that there there's a significant population of students for whom intersectionality, the logic of being more oppressed, the more “marginalized identities” that you have... that logic serves as a doler-out of status, such that if you’re black and gay you’re actually higher status than if you're merely black, or merely gay.

And so, it operates from an algorithm of the more oppressed you are in the intersectional framework, the more social status you have in the local subculture of Ivy League university, whatever you want to call it.

And so, the reason I've said that she is much more influential than it's given credit for -- and obviously it's hard to draw a straight line from her paper to the subculture, but very few academics can claim to have created an idea that actually just translates into the social fabric in such a way that people in that subculture no longer even question where the idea originally came from, because it's seeped in so deeply.

Julia: Yeah. I was asking about her because I was wondering if you would credit her, or blame her, for a significant portion of this shift that I brought up a few minutes ago, from -- call it colorblindness to race consciousness. Or is that a different strain that she's responsible for, or a different shift?

Coleman: No, that's exactly the strain she's responsible for. She's been one of the leading critics of colorblindness, and I think it's safe to say she's one of the founders of critical race theory --

Julia: What's the connection between that and race consciousness?

Coleman: The way I would put it is that, for instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw writes in one of her essays that critical race theory was born out of a dissatisfaction with the idea of colorblindness. That's its genesis, its core motivating principle, is the rhetoric of colorblindness.

Civil rights was insufficient, so critical race theory was born as an alternative philosophy. Critical race theory, it's the academic face of race consciousness. It's the philosophy undergirding race consciousness.

Julia: And sorry to ask you to keep defining things, but could you define race consciousness? I think I sort of tried to, but I'm not sure I did a good job.

Coleman: Yeah. Loosely, it's the proposition that race is an inescapable fact of life, that we should not try to transcend it. It's a set of ideas that doesn't identify progress on race relations with transcending race, but rather with meditating on it more deeply, and in a specific way that focuses on the way in which race shapes your outcomes in life. As a white person this means you ought to meditate on the ways in which your whiteness makes you privileged and makes your life easier, the fact that we live in a "white supremacist" society where everything is tilted so as to make life easier for whites, in ways that are subtle and hard to see. That there's a wind at the back of white people that they scarcely perceive, but a strong headwind facing people of color.

It identifies progress with noticing the ways in which society is racially tilted. And for black people it defines progress as deeply meditating on the ways in which your blackness has hampered your success in life. And there's no sense that transcending race is really the goal, or if there is, it's only a goal that would make sense once racism is completely eliminated.

Julia: Great. I definitely want to delve more into the disagreement between the colorblind approach and the race conscious approach, but before I forget, I wanted to ask:

I guess I'm just wondering if it should be as surprising to me as it is that something like critical race theory, which is this esoteric academic theory, took root in the mainstream. Is it just me, or is that really strange and surprising? Has that ever happened before?

... Maybe Freud, actually, now that I asked that. That might actually be another example of an esoteric academic theory that took root in the public. Freudianism.

Coleman: Right. I think probably in both of those cases there's something ... The actual theories are a bit too esoteric for mass export, but there's something in them that is sort of meme-able and appealing, right?

Julia: That's a good word, yeah.

Coleman: For Freud, you never forget the first time you learn that you want to have sex with your mother, right?

Julia: Right.

Coleman: It's unforgettable, and I'm sure only a small part of what Freud actually thought. In the case of critical race theory too, the things that get exported are inevitably the least esoteric parts of it, I think.

Here's the core idea of critical race theory, and this is probably even a bit more esoteric than what the average person who has heard of CRT thinks of: The core idea is that what seems like a neutral standard of judging something -- or just a race neutral policy, or a race neutral notion -- is in fact a white supremacist notion in disguise.

And the way I often think about it is with the analogy of accents. When I was a kid I grew up around people who all spoke roughly the way I did, and then when you hear someone speak your language differently initially I learned to say that person speaks with an accent. I don't. They do. An accent is something that they have. And at some point, you have the epiphany that there's not such thing as not having an accent. An accent is simply a way of speaking.

Julia: That's very well put. Except that *I* don't have an accent, but other than that, that's a good point.

Coleman: Exactly. Yeah. Basically, the realization there is that there's no zone of neutrality from which to judge somebody else's accent as a deviation. There's no view from nowhere.

What critical race theory alleges is that most of us are in the position of the child who has not yet had the epiphany, but the site of our confusion is not accents. It is the value structure of society as a whole, all of the values that we have been taught that distinguish legality from illegality, right from wrong, beauty from ugliness. These are not objective or race neutral standards. They are actually white supremacist standards masquerading as neutrality.

And this is why often the battlegrounds between CRT and color blindness will be something like the SAT. Where I would say that the SAT is fairly neutral, like if you're asking someone to do math, that is a race neutral standard by which to judge someone's math skill.

But someone from a critical race theory perspective will say: historically these tests have excluded, have been culturally biased. They have asked questions that were easier for people from particular cultures to understand. They were created in a society where it was considered normal to exclude black people from public accommodations, and so on and so forth.

That's an example. That's sort of the core contention of CRT, is this rejection that anything could in principle be race neutral.

Julia: One of the things on my list of questions I wanted to ask you was if you could present basically a steel man of critical race theory, which I know you're not the hugest fan of, or far from wholeheartedly agree with. But the analogy to the accent, and the summary you just gave, actually feels pretty steel-manny to me. That feels like a pretty reasonable, to my mind, presentation of the theory.

Is there anything else from critical race theory that you think, "There's a steel man version of that that's worth acknowledging," or that you're willing to say, "Yes, this is a good and valid point even if I think it's over-applied, or even if I think it's wielded badly by many people," or something like that?

Is there anything else you want to say about critical race theory before we get into talking about your disagreement with it?

Coleman: I guess one thing I would say is that historically, I think it's true to say they're have been many bad faith arguments that use colorblindness as ... That essentially pretend to be colorblind, but are in fact not. That many racist policies in the past have actually put on the mask of colorblindness. And that it has happened so many times that it's worth wondering... that you can see how someone may simply come to distrust any idea that claims to be race neutral.

That's one thing I would say is true. Of course, the reverse is not therefore true, right? And sorry to not be able to steel man without immediately talking about the problem...

Julia: No, that's fine. We should talk about both sides.

Coleman: For instance, just because many liars have claimed to tell the truth, it doesn't mean every time someone is claiming to tell the truth they're lying.

In the same way, just because many allegedly colorblind policies have actually been racist policies throughout American history, it doesn't mean that every person who claims to support colorblindness is a racist. It doesn't mean that every policy that claims to be race neutral is in fact a manifestation of white supremacy.

Julia: Right. This feels so parallel to a dynamic that I keep getting hit with again and again when it comes to rationality and reasoning, which I tend to write and talk about a lot. Which is that there are so many cases of people waving the flag of "rationality," or "science-based," or "empiricism," to justify something that's just their own personal bias. They're just claiming that their view is the rational reasonable one.

And so, one shift in my thinking in the last five to 10 years has been to become much more sympathetic to people who are instantly distrustful of any discussion of what is rational or reasonable. Because they've seen it wielded unfairly, or unjustifiedly, so many times.

But again, as you say, that doesn't mean some methods of reasoning aren't better at producing accurate answers than other methods. It doesn't mean that some policies aren't actually more evidence-based than other policies. And it doesn't mean that it isn't worth trying to make those distinctions.

But yeah, I have become more sympathetic to people who've been burned too many times by people using the label.

Coleman: Yeah, definitely. I think I just saw on Twitter, I think this guy Philippe Lemoine, a pretty good blogger, very rational by my estimation in terms of backing up all his claims with research and whatnot. He's bashing “trust the science” takes, and I think what he was getting at is just that he's seen so many people where the mantle of “I believe in science” is a way of essentially rebuking their political enemies.

For instance, there's a gym a few blocks away from me that had a banner up this summer that I think said, "Black lives matter. Trans lives matter. Science is real."

I think the implication is people with that cluster of political beliefs believe in science generally whereas Republicans and conservatives reject science. And on the issue of climate change, that could have some general truth to it.

But what I found is it's not a matter of principle as someone famously wrote, it's just a matter of whose ox is getting gored. On another topic, if a paper comes out tomorrow that finds hypothetically that a fetus can feel pain in the second week... Then it would be the conservatives being pro-science and the liberals being anti-science, right? So, it's just a matter of political expedience and confirming preexisting beliefs.

Julia: Yeah. A thought experiment that occurred to me recently that's kind of interesting is: If you imagine that 90% of scientists in the most prestigious institutions in the US were conservative, how would you feel -- or I'm asking myself this, how would I feel -- about the scientific consensus? About it being reported that the scientific consensus on such and such topic is X?

In an ideal world, I would just be able to read all the papers and judge for myself whether the science is sound. Or in an ideal world I could just trust that all the scientists were not influenced by their political beliefs and just trying to do good science. But I don't actually think that's realistic, and I don't think it's realistic for someone to actually read all the papers and evaluate their methodology themselves.

And so, it does actually seem kind of reasonable for me to be more suspicious of the scientific consensus if the vast majority of scientists have political views that you think are misguided and abhorrent.

That thought experiment made me somewhat more sympathetic to conservatives being less trusting of the scientific consensus on a topic. Especially when that scientific consensus is something that accords with liberal views, and doesn't

accord with conservative views -- like “Climate change is real, we need to get the government involved to tamp down on industry.”

That is a kind of convenient conclusion from a liberal perspective, in a way. And so if you combine that fact with the fact that the vast majority of scientists are liberal... I can see why some conservatives would have trepidation about that. Even if they're not, deep down, any more or less sympathetic to science than the liberals are.

Does that make sense?

Coleman: Yeah. Yeah. I guess it's about the cost of information and knowledge.

Julia: Right.

Coleman: Time is precious. Very few people have the time to become an expert at a subject, and then beyond that, just keep up with the insane number of papers that come out.

And so, if you want to know something about the world, and almost all of us do, you have to use heuristics and reputation as a proxy for actually doing the work. And that by definition means you're going to get it wrong more often than you would if you became an expert in the subject, but there's sort of no practical alternative for most of us, most of the time.

And so you essentially have to stereotype a little bit. You have to sort of notice patterns. I've noticed, for example, one journal published this horrible paper that was discredited, so now I'm going to rate that paper lower in terms of my trust, that the fact that they let that get through-

Julia: The paper or the journal?

Coleman: Like a journal, for instance. I'm just using a random hypothetical. Or if I know that this institution is funded by the alcohol industry, I'm not going to trust the paper that they release about alcohol.

The problem is you're going to be wrong some of the time if you take those heuristics to just be completely accurate. The key is not ... I think it's not like you can just get rid of those biases. The goal is not to get rid of those biases, or heuristics, or stereotypes because they actually do serve a purpose for you.

I think the challenge is to just always be open to the idea that your preexisting picture of an institution, or anything, could be wrong. To understand that if my heuristic about this conservative think tank is generally true, it can still misfire in any particular instance, and I should be open to the idea that actually this time it's right, even though it nevertheless is bad. You know?

Julia: Right.

Coleman: This is kind of how I view Fox News, for instance. I've seen a lot of pure propaganda coming out of that channel, and I think it's pretty good to have that kind of attitude towards it, to understand for the most part these are going to be conservative takes, whether it's right or wrong. And it's not to say this isn't the same on MSNBC, it's just, Fox is the example that just jumps out to me first.

The challenge is just to be open to "Actually it can still be right, even though it's generally well-characterized as partisan and propagandistic."

Julia: Right. I wanted to pull back from this admittedly very interesting tangent, to talking again about the disagreement between color blindness versus race consciousness.

So I guess I'm mainly just curious what your take is on what the real cruxes of disagreement are. And the cruxes of disagreement could be ... I'll just give a few examples:

One kind of crux of disagreement could just be misunderstanding. Maybe the race conscious people think that the colorblind approach is claiming that no racism exists anymore. That's not actually what you're claiming, and if they understood that then maybe you guys wouldn't disagree so much. That's one possibility.

Or your disagreements could be more empirical, where maybe they believe that racism is much more common, or much more serious, than you believe it is currently. And if you shared their view of the scope of racism today, you would agree more with their policy prescription.

Or your crux of disagreement could be more of a values one, where it doesn't really come down to an empirical prediction that you disagree about, it's just that they have a different sense of what is fair or just. Like maybe given past injustices perpetuated on black people, there are certain ways we should talk about race now that are a just response to the past. And that's not how you think about morality or justice.

Anyway, those are three examples of what the cruxes could be like: misunderstandings, or a difference in empirical prediction, or a difference in values. And I'm wondering if you have a sense of how your disagreement with the race-conscious camp fits into that schema. Or if it doesn't.

Coleman: I love that question.

Julia: Okay, great.

Coleman: And I'm curious what you think of my response here because I'm not actually sure which of those three options is the crux of the disagreement, but I do have thoughts on-

Julia: And it could be multiple ones.

Coleman: Yeah. So, the first one is misunderstanding. There definitely is a misunderstanding. To me, what it means to advocate colorblindness has nothing to do with whether racism exists, or how much racism exists. It's just completely orthogonal to the question of how much racism there is.

It is, put simply, the idea that race is not deeply important. It's insignificant. It's only skin deep.

Julia: That it is, or that it should be?

Coleman: That it is. That it ultimately is, and to the extent that people are making it important they're doing something unethical. So, the racist makes a mistake by assuming that race is significant, and he makes not only an intellectual or logical error, he makes a moral error.

And that the goal should be to get more and more people onboard with the truth, which is that your race does not track any of the important parts of what it means to be a human being. It doesn't determine what you think. It doesn't determine your moral worth.

It is that race is sort of akin to hair color, and if we came across a society where people thought their hair color was the most important thing, and there were debates about whether you should marry people with other hair colors, and whatnot -- that actually we are that society, but with respect to skin color. And that we should increasingly move in the space of ideas towards the idea of colorblindness, to the extent that it's possible.

So, that's the first option, is there is a misunderstanding that what it means to be colorblind is that you think racism doesn't exist.

Julia: Yeah, and I've definitely seen that. I was reading some left-wing critiques of the colorblind approach, and was surprised that they presented it as the belief that society is already fair and just, and racism isn't a problem. Not all of them. But it's not an uncommon characterization of your position.

Coleman: And there's also another more understandable straw man of colorblindness, which is that the person espousing it is claiming to be completely free of racial bias themselves.

Julia: Yeah. Yeah. The “I don't see color”...?

Coleman: Exactly. The notion that I don't see color. Which is something that a lot of people actually say. It's something that I never say, and I think can't be true -- or it's so misleading that I have to read it very charitably to see how it could be true for someone, right?

Julia: Right.

Coleman: I do see color, and so do you. And not only that, I'm pretty sure an honest account of my mind with regard to race would reveal something other than a mind that is perfectly race neutral in all of its fleeting thoughts all of the time. I'm sure that that's not my mind, and I'm pretty sure that that's not the vast majority of people's minds. So that's another thing that I don't mean when I'm talking about colorblindness.

And then, the second option you gave was sort of a disagreement about the empirical facts about how much racial bias exists in society.

Julia: Yeah, or it could be other empirical disagreements. Differing predictions about which policies will have which effects in the world.

Coleman: Mm-hmm. Yeah. There is a pattern of I think people who support colorblindness tending to believe that there's less racism, and people who are against color blindness tending to believe that there's more. And that's interesting.

But the further back you go in history, the more that that pattern disappears. So, if you go back to A. Philip Randolph, or Bayard Rustin... A. Philip Randolph was the creator of the March On Washington Movement in 1940, '41. Bayard Rustin was the organizer of the 1963 March On Washington, the famous one, and one of MLK's strategists.

At that point, the people supporting colorblindness, like Rustin and Randolph, were perfectly aware of how much racism there was in society. That went without saying. And indeed were the people that were the most impatient with America's lack of change, the people most keenly attuned to the amount of racism there was. And to combating it. But the moral framework they did it within was one that held that the goal is to get past race.

So, logically, there's no relationship between your evaluation of how much racism exists in society and what your point of view on the ultimate significance of race is.

Julia: Do you think, though, that the race conscious camp would agree with the end goal -- of a society in which race is just like hair color, and people don't use it as an important determinant of anything, and outcomes across races are basically the same – that they might agree with that as the end goal, but they disagree about the strategy by which to get there? And they think that given that there was so much racism for so long, and there still is to a significant extent, we need to push back in the opposite direction, and that's how we get to the point of neutrality?

Coleman: Yes. No, people have expressed that. In the famous book Black Power, the manifesto of the movement of the same name, they write that color blindness may ultimately be the proper goal, but we're not there yet.

And this is a very interesting framing of the issue to me. Because this way of framing the issue says colorblindness would only make sense in a society with no

racism; therefore, because our society still has racial prejudice, we are not yet ready to push for colorblindness.

There's a kind of stages, or eras, approach to history here. It's like when we're still in the age of racism we need a race-conscious politics in order to combat it. Once that succeeds, and racism is eliminated throughout the land, then and only then will it make sense to say that race does not matter.

Again, this is I think a misunderstanding of colorblindness. Like I said, it does not depend on how much racism there is, or what imagined era we're living in. This is also why I don't use the term post-racial, because it kind of feeds into that misunderstanding that there's a racial era, and post-racial era, and our attitude should change depending on which era we happen to live in. I think that's confusing and unnecessary.

Julia: Okay. Help me understand where ... I'll describe a viewpoint, and you can tell me how this fits into the color-blind versus race conscious disagreement. The view would be something like:

We should be shooting for a society like the one you described, where race really just doesn't matter. But we're not yet there. And it is absolutely worth talking about, and trying to do something about, the ways in which black people or Hispanic people are still disadvantaged relative to white people. Like figuring out a way to close the racial gap in education outcomes, and figuring out how to fix the damage that's been done by incarcerating black people disproportionately.

Would you call that position consistent with the colorblindness approach? And how would someone from the race conscious camp disagree with that?

Sorry, is that clear? I don't know if that was clear.

Coleman: I think so. So the idea is: a person who is very energized around solving problems of racial disparity, but still ultimately wants to live in a society where we're not thinking of ourselves as races but as individuals.

Julia: Yeah, I mean... I guess when I experience disagreements with the people from the race conscious camp -- and I do often, they often say things or do things that I disagree with. But it doesn't feel right to characterize those disagreements as "They think that race is an important thing to talk about and I don't."

They're more often disagreements about epistemology. Like, I would disagree that an opinion counts if it comes from a black and gay person but it doesn't count if it comes from a white person. To me, that's not a proper way to figure stuff out as a society, and it's not really fair either.

So I wouldn't agree with that, but I would agree with "There are still important racial disparities and we should be trying to fix them."

Coleman: Yeah. So I think that the first one, the epistemological point about discounting your opinion if you're say a white male, that's definitely a classic place where someone in that camp might disagree with a colorblind person.

But yeah, as you say, just being worried about racial disparity and wanting to live in a society with more equal results, I don't think that that puts you in either camp necessarily.

It partly would depend on what you proposed for how we get there. And that would be... So for example, if you want race conscious policies... I just read something about the state of Oregon earmarking tens of millions of dollars specifically for black business owners, rather than struggling business owners in general, based on socioeconomic... So that would be an example where the way that you're addressing racial disparity is going to separate people in these two camps.

Julia: Right. Okay, then maybe could you describe the alternative. What is a way to close these racial gaps without race-conscious policies?

Coleman: So, for example, the linguist John McWhorter, who I see eye to eye with on a lot of these issues, strongly believes that black kids, and kids in general, would be much better off learning to read initially based on a different system, that according to him has much more empirical backing, for teaching children how to read. And that a lot of the reason that black kids in particular are behind in reading is because this system has not yet been universalized.

Say I support universalizing this system. That may have a disparate benefit, if he's right, for black kids. But it didn't require me to tailor it specifically for black kids or to anchor myself to anything other than the notion that all kids should be given the best possible education.

Say for instance, I think -- as I do -- that nobody should ever go to prison for anything related to marijuana use. If I could snap my fingers and make that a reality overnight, that would have a disproportionately good benefit on black communities. I would argue, probably, you would get just fewer teenage and young male black boys in the revolving doors of county and city jails and whatnot. You'd potentially be able to legalize and tax marijuana, and bring it above board, and get rid of all of the associated gang turf warfare and whatnot.

In any event, that doesn't require me to frame the legalization of marijuana in anything other than universal race neutral terms. I'm not doing it because I have anything more or less than a concern for human welfare, period. I can acknowledge the disparate impact it's had on black people without anchoring my reason for changing the policy to something race specific.

Julia: Right. So the distinction is: One camp wants policies that are explicitly aiming at, by definition, trying to help black people in particular. Or trying to help Hispanic people in particular.

Whereas you, and John McWhorter and people like you, are advocating for... Paying attention to, "What are some of the major causes of disparities between black people and white people?" And trying to find policies that address those disparities. But if other people who are not black happen to be affected by those problems as well, then this policy will help them too. It's not specifically trying to help only black people.

Is that right?

Coleman: Yeah, that's right.

Julia: Okay. You know, when we were talking about the idea on the race conscious side that it's much better to try to counter past racism by going the other way, and that that's a better way to get to the neutral colorblind ideal than to aim directly at it...

I'm wondering what kind of evidence or argument would move someone one way or another on that issue? Like, I feel like I have an intuition that going the opposite direction, away from anti-black racism to anti-white racism, is not going to help. But I don't know that I have data to support that. It's just what seems true to me.

I'm wondering if there's any more specific or empirical way to adjudicate that disagreement.

Coleman: That's a good question. There are lots of papers on... Psychology papers on racism. But as per our earlier part of the conversation, I tend to be very distrustful of psych papers.

Julia: As do I, yeah.

Coleman: It seems like none of them replicate, and it's so easy when you get the one that says the thing that you already think, to be, "Yeah, I was right all along." But there's 10 papers that say the opposite. It's sort of rough.

Julia: It's even worse on ideologically charged topics too.

Coleman: Yeah.

Julia: I basically just ignore them.

Coleman: But falling back on intuition here... I think there's a strong tendency probably baked into human nature to some extent to not want to be denigrated over parts of your identity that you have no control over. And to not want to lose social status over parts of your identity you have no control over.

That is what was so frustrating about Jim Crow to begin with. There is a kind of an interesting misunderstanding, I think, about the civil rights movement. Which is that black people had no economic prospects prior to the civil rights movement, and then, once black people were allowed to vote and use public

accommodations and whatnot, then they could start rising the ranks into the middle class.

The truth is, the civil rights movement had very little effect at all on economics. There was a pre-existing trend of black people rising up into the middle class, and that trend simply continued. The civil rights movement was much more about the dignity of finally as a black person being allowed to sit at a restaurant and order a thing. It was a much more of a psychic accomplishment than it was about material progress. There are lots of communities that make material progress in complete segregation. There was famously black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that was thriving but then destroyed.

So it was much more about the element of just not being told that you're inferior because of your skin color, because of something you have zero control over. We're all just tossed into the world into these bodies. So it seems to me pretty basic and certainly true that cranking the dial to 10 on anti-white rhetoric is going to piss white people off, for precisely the same reasons that I get pissed off the times when I've been a victim of actual racism.

It's also the anger of having been falsely accused of something. The times in my life when I've actually... The very few times when racism has actually intruded into my life and in ways that were important and painful, the source of my anger has been "Why am I being accused of something that I didn't do on account of my skin color?"

It's just this infuriating feeling. Strangely, it's actually very similar to the feeling of being accused of being a racist while not actually being one. The anger is not so different.

So I think the more that we normalize rhetoric that engages all of those understandable defensive emotions, the less we are able to cohere around sane principles and ideas about common humanity. Which most people pay lip service to, but we really ought to redouble our commitment to.

Julia: That is very well put.

We've touched on justice a number of times in this conversation. One thing on which my views have shifted a little bit in the general area of social justice is:

There are a number of race conscious policies, like affirmative action and like reparations which are often accused of being unjust. Because the people who have to pay for those policies -- whether that's in the money that goes towards reparations, or whether that's in a decreased probability of getting jobs, in the case of affirmative action -- the people who have to pay for those policies did not themselves commit the wrongs that the policies are trying to compensate for. "My ancestors, not myself, participated in slavery," people would say. Or for many people their ancestors weren't even in the US when slavery or Jim Crow happened.

That argument for the injustice of these policies always felt very compelling to me. And then... I'll describe my shift and you can tell me what you think of it. My mind change is that being a citizen of a country gives you benefits and it comes with costs. There are benefits, like your government will prioritize your welfare over the welfare of a random person somewhere else in the world.

And then some of the costs are... You have to assume some responsibility for the bad things your government did. You do, in fact, have to pay... To some extent, your tax dollars go towards paying the settlement money for people who won cases against the US government, things like that.

So is it necessarily unfair for people to have to, to some extent, pay to right some of the wrongs that the US government committed, even if they themselves personally as individuals didn't commit those wrongs? Is that necessarily unjust?

Coleman: No, it isn't, actually. I think that is probably the worst argument against reparations that is common. If you think about it, by the logic of that argument, we shouldn't have paid reparations to Japanese Americans interned in World War II. Because most Americans had nothing to do with that internment. They were living elsewhere. They didn't sign off on it.

Julia: That's a good example.

Coleman: That would kind of... It would almost rule out every example of reparations, or many at least. I do think that is sort of a facile argument against it, but it's a very common one that people feel.

Julia: So do you make a justice-based argument against reparations? Or is it more of just a consequentialist argument, where it's going to make race relations worse and not better?

Coleman: I guess a little bit of both. So for me the first thing is I do not view people merely as members of intertemporal abstract groups. I was born in 1996. Yes, I am a descendant of American slaves, but I was not a slave. I was not anything close to it. It's so remote from my experience to claim damages on behalf of my... Let me put it this way. Have you ever met someone whose parents grew up in grinding poverty but they didn't? But nevertheless, sort of claimed the credibility and mantle of having overcome that?

Julia: Yeah, I mean, people who say, "Well my ancestors immigrated to this country with nothing and they worked hard..." and there's a certain moral righteousness that that gives them because of their ancestry.

Coleman: Right. But the truth is they were born upper middle class and didn't struggle at all. There's something disingenuous and annoying about that.

So for instance, my mother grew up in grinding poverty in the South Bronx. Siblings in jail and dying, and all of that. But she got out of it. By the time I was born, I lived a very privileged life. For me to claim some kind of victim status on her behalf, I think would strike most people properly as disingenuous and

irksome. However, we're sort of totally allowing that, over many, many, many generations, in the case of slavery reparations.

Julia: I thought the argument was that people like you would be more or less exceptions to the rule. In that you're doing great; you don't really need reparations.

But we can't have policies where we judge the deservingness of every single person. We just have to look at, on average, did this group suffer as a result of these past policies the government enacted? On average, do they deserve to be compensated? Even if that's going to result in some members of that group being compensated who didn't really need it or deserve it.

So do you still think that that argument holds at the group level, or do you think that kind of group level reasoning is not valid?

Coleman: I think that there are... Okay, so let's take the example of a black person today who is poor. We're going to say that that black person is poor because of slavery and Jim Crow?

Julia: Partly, indirectly. Is the argument, I think.

Coleman: There's something that has intuitive appeal about that. But then if you actually meet people and learn how they came to their station in life, it's often so complicated and so individual. And so much so that it can't be reduced to slavery and Jim Crow.

There are so many white people in similar circumstances. Why is the opioid epidemic hitting white people harder? There's a story to be told there. But history is not so simple as to be reduced to slavery and Jim Crow, therefore, that's the reason why black people are disproportionately poor. It’s so much more complicated than that, I think.

Julia: So your justice-based argument... to the extent that you oppose reparations on justice-based grounds, it's not so much that it's unjust for non-black citizens of the US to pay for the reparations. It's more that it's unjust for the black citizens of the US to *get* the reparations. Is that accurate?

Coleman: Yes. My argument has always been that it would make sense for someone like my grandfather to get reparations for having grown up during segregation. That's something that --

Julia: Because it's more direct? And it's the person to whom the wrong was done by the government?

Coleman: Exactly. The person to whom the wrong was done. So yeah, that's my argument really.

Julia: Okay, that's helpful.

I have a unrelated question about racism I've been wanting to ask you. I'm really curious how you think about what should count as racist or offensive. So let me explain:

You can think of there being a spectrum of things that have been called offensive, or could be called offensive. Where at one extreme, we'd have things like grotesque racial characters of black people or Jewish people -- which to me, are pretty clearly offensive.

Then the other extreme, we'd have things like... “If you're a white person and you cook Mexican food, that's racist, because it's cultural appropriation.” Or on Facebook, the other day, I saw a friend of mine post a reaction GIF of Oprah going like, “You get a car! And you get a car!” And then she later took it down and she apologized, because she said she had learned that that was “digital blackface,” for a white person to post a GIF of a black person. Which to me seems very silly.

Okay, so that's towards the other end of the spectrum. Then more in the middle of the spectrum, I think, would be things like maybe a white person singing along to a song that has the N word in it. Anyway, you could put points on the spectrum at different places of course. But there is this spectrum of potentially, arguably racist things.

And what I keep wondering is how to decide where to draw the line. Because every criterion I can think of to use just seems horribly flawed. Like, for example, one obvious approach is you can just go with your gut and say, well “This seems racist to me,” or “This seems fine to me.” But I feel like there should be a somewhat more principled approach than that.

Another approach is you could go with the rule that “If anyone from the minority group in question has called it offensive, then it's offensive.” But that seems way too inclusive! Because there's always someone who thinks something's offensive. It's like a corollary of rule 34: If it exists, there is someone who is offended by it.

So this is a very open question in my mind. I'm just wondering if you have any heuristics that you use to decide where to draw that line, other than just your own gut reaction.

Coleman: No, I love the way that you framed that. Because it does seem like every way of thinking about it is wrong.

Julia: Right? Thank you!

Coleman: It can't just be your gut because, how could it be? Then there's no way to argue to persuade someone of anything. It's like, what is in your gut is therefore right. It's like, okay, where the conversation ends.

Julia: Right.

Coleman: On the other hand, is it simply a matter of the consensus of the group offended? Can it really just be that? Because if for example some crazy high percentage of

Muslims in a particular city, say, are offended by drawings of the prophet, does that mean I have to agree with that?

On the other hand, how can the consensus of the group be completely irrelevant? If 99% of black people say they're offended by blackface but most white people aren't offended by whiteface, does it really make sense to say, "Well, I'm going to have the principle, the opinion to treat it all equally, despite that it's extremely offensive to so many black people"?

Julia: Right.

Coleman: It's very tough. I don't really know how to think about it.

Julia: Another flip side that just occurred to me, of your example of "Well what if a vast majority of Muslims were offended by a caricature of Muhammad"...The flip side of that, I think would be:

Imagine going back to the 1930s and polling women, asking them, "Is it sexist or offensive to say that a woman wouldn't be a good president?" I think it's pretty likely that a majority would say, "No, that's not sexist. That's just true, that women wouldn't make good leaders or whatever."

And so I think there are arguably often cases where a group has been conditioned culturally to be okay with certain things that they *shouldn't* be okay with. And so I also am hesitant to say, "Well, if this group thinks it's fine, then it's definitely fine."

So that just leaves me more adrift.

Coleman: Yeah. Well, I think it comes down to whether you believe that there is such a thing as moral progress. Where we make progress through talking about what's right, and people's beliefs and what offends them changes as a result. I think that definitely happens. And for that to be possible, it has to be possible to persuade somebody that they shouldn't be offended by something, or that they should be offended by something.

Julia: So what form does that persuasion take? I feel like often it's just social pressure – "I can't believe you don't agree that this is offensive, or isn't offensive." And that's not... I'm not happy with that heuristic either.

Coleman: Right. No, that definitely can't be it.

One way of persuading, I think, is to appeal to the particular historical context of a thing.

Julia: How so?

Coleman: So for instance if, I don't know, if you talk about the history of blackface and find that it was often used to... Or generally used for what we now consider to be racist

caricatures of black people by white people, by white actors also taking jobs away from black actors. You reasonably feel that's a ugly part of American history. And maybe symbolically being offended at blackface today, it's to say that we don't want to reiterate. We don't want to remind people or give the impression that we condone that aspect of history.

I don't know. For instance I think there's a famous example of... I can't remember what it was. Maybe I can look it up. But a town, where in recent memory a black person was arrested by a white police officer who was riding a horse and was... The way he was arrested was with a rope around his neck.

Abstractly, it's fine to arrest people however. If we all used ropes we'd all think it's normal. We use handcuffs. But because of the particular historical context of lynching in America, you have to be aware that that has a particular resonance.

So one way, I think, is to appeal to the particular historical context of a place. Which then means that what should be offensive in one place should not necessarily be offensive somewhere else, and maybe that's okay. That's one way.

Another way of persuading someone is to say "This thing is actually harmful to people."

Julia: Right. Which, I feel like that's often the kind of argument that people make, but it often feels very after-the-fact to me. Or, a bit of a rationalization. That for other reasons they've already decided that this thing is offensive, and so they're trying to construct an argument for how it's harmful. And it rarely feels all that convincing to me.

Coleman: No, yeah, the harm arguments are usually not convincing at all to me as well.

So, for instance, a white person saying the N word because they're singing along to a Kanye West song that they love. The part of me that is a social creature attuned to the norms of my society cringes when I hear that, because I know I'm supposed to and I've been socialized to.

But upon reflection, I can't see why it's wrong. Why the word itself is magic. I can't point to a single black person who is tangibly harmed by a white person having used the word in that way. I don't think anyone else can. So the harm argument actually doesn't go through.

Julia: Yeah. We have a really strong expectation in our culture that you should have to point to how a harm is being committed. And so that's how the argument gets framed, even though I feel like that's not the genuine crux for people.

Coleman: Yeah. I think often there's an appeal, when people say "This speech is harmful" to the fact that the wider culture has this view is harmful. So it's not that what you said actually harmed a particular black person. It's that say, your use of the N word with a soft "a" in the context of a rap song is part of a wider culture in which racism is... And then a bunch of claims about wider society. Some of which may be true, and then get symbolically imputed into your speech act.

Julia: Yeah, this is something I've noticed... To jump to a separate example, it's something I've noticed in discussions about when a rich person donates money to something. Like when Mark Zuckerberg pledged to donate a bunch of his money. A lot of people got angry at that, and were trying to argue that that was a bad thing.

But their arguments, as far as I could tell, were always about the fact that it's wrong that we have people who are as rich as Mark Zuckerberg. Deep down, they were never about Zuckerberg's decision to donate money being harmful in any way.

And so, this feels like a common pattern that's pretty frustrating, is that people will frame an argument as being that something is harmful, when actually it's just a symptom of a different thing that they think is harmful.

Coleman: Yeah, and that style of argument is very popular and very appealing to people, very effective. But I think it's because a lot of people don't decouple those things. They don't decouple this particular act of donating to charity from the separate issue of wealth inequality. And so the way you feel about one becomes the way you feel about the other.

[musical interlude]

Julia: That was Coleman Hughes, and if you enjoyed this conversation you should definitely check out his own podcast, *Conversations with Coleman*. And follow him on Twitter – he's C-O-L-D-X-M-A-N, coldxman, and he's one of my favorite people to follow on Twitter. I'll add links to those two things on the podcast website as well as a few of his articles that I particularly liked.

That's all for this episode. I hope you'll join me next time, for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.