

# Racist perception

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*It is increasingly common to hear talk of 'racist perceptions'. While these have begun to be studied in the philosophy of mind (e.g. in debates about the border between perception and cognition), they've received relatively little attention in analytic philosophy of race, particularly regarding the analysis of racism. This paper advances an account of racist perceptions and draws out their implications for debates about the nature of racism. First, it argues for an account on which racist perceptions are best seen as manifesting racism rather than being racist-making. Second, it argues that views on which racist attitudes are irrational or immoral will be particularly ill-suited to handle racist perception. A desire to account for racist perception should push us towards either a bias-centred account of racism, or an ideology-based account.*

**Keywords:** racism; philosophy of race; philosophy of perception; bias; ideology.

## I. Introduction

Analyses of personal racism (the kind concerned distinctly with whether and to what extent *persons* are racist) typically regard it as determined by mental states like beliefs, desires, and other attitudes.<sup>1</sup> However, an increasing body of work is suggesting that our perceptual experiences can be racist too. In visual perception, a prominent example is the apparent tendency, most notably in law-enforcement, to misperceive black suspects as holding weapons (Payne 2001; Eberhardt et al. 2004). Another is 'adultification bias', where research

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<sup>1</sup>In this sense, the analysis of personal racism can be distinguished from institutional racism (Ture and Hamilton 1967) and other potential domains of racism, which will tend to posit different conditions.

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suggests a tendency to perceive black children as older, and less innocent, than white children (Goff et al. 2014; Cooke and Halberstadt 2021). In auditory perception, research suggests that people perceive black (or otherwise racialized) voices in distorted ways that align with racial stereotypes.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, the academic literature is catching up with the folk thought, as this phenomenon has long been in the common consciousness. Whether it's people falsely hearing black women's speech as angry, or seeing black men's movements as violent, it's common to hear talk of racists perceiving people of certain groups in a distorted, caricatured way. While some work is starting to look at what these purportedly 'racist perceptions' can tell us about the architecture of the mind, or the epistemic role of perceptual experience (Munton 2019), there hasn't been much attempt to offer an account of what, if anything, would make perception genuinely racist. Nor has there been much attention paid to what the existence of racist-perception would tell us about the nature of racism. This paper aims to change that.

I first advance an account of when a perceptual experience counts as racist, arguing that racist perceptions are race-based perceptions that *manifest* the perceiver's racism, being formed by the distorting effects of racist attitudes. I then consider the implications of this for debates around the nature of racism. A key point of debate between theorists of racism concerns what makes racism essentially criticizable.<sup>3</sup> On socio-political accounts, the essentially criticizable feature of racism is a link to socio-political structures (e.g. white supremacy or societal racial oppression). For moral accounts, the feature is some moral condition (e.g. blameworthy racial disrespect or antipathy). For epistemic accounts, it is a matter of irrationality, or of truth-distorting bias. I argue my account has significant implications both within, and between, the different camps.

Now, this paper is only concerned with whether and how instances of perceptual experience/perceptual judgement can be racist, and which theories of racism are best placed to account for them. There are other questions one can ask about the relationship between racism and perceptions: 'Which common perceptions contribute to racial injustice?', 'How will people tend to be viewed in certain kinds of racist society?', etc. These questions are important, and there is already philosophical work discussing them, even if more within the continental tradition.<sup>4</sup> But the kind of apparent racist misperception I'm

<sup>2</sup>See Payne, Downing, and Fleming (2000), Koch, Gross, and Kolts (2001), and Kurinec (2021) for empirical work on the connection of stereotypes to racialized voices.

<sup>3</sup>Naturally, many racists will be criticisable in multiple ways, but these debates concern the central, *necessary* bad-making feature.

<sup>4</sup>Fanon (2008) for example. Though see the work of Curry, Yancy, and others for interesting discussion of the societal-perceptual dimensions typical of black-male experience (Yancy 2008; Curry 2017).

looking at here has had little engagement in the philosophy of race. This, I take it, is an important gap to fill.

## II. What are racist perceptions?

### II.1 Racist perception

As I highlighted in the introduction, there are various kinds of distorted perceptual experiences which people are inclined to call ‘racist’. The police officer who falsely perceives a black suspect to be holding a gun rather than the phone they’re really holding, is a paradigm case.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, many would take it to be racist to hear black voices as more aggressive (Kurinec 2021). Even smell and taste *might* be thought to deliver racist perceptions, such as when a smell of curry spices causes them to perceive a property as of lower value (Taylor 2017). In this paper, I’ll return most often to the example of police misidentifying black suspects as holding a weapon, which has received a lot of attention in social-scientific literature about police bias (Eberhardt et al. 2004; Charbonneau, Spencer, and Glaser 2017) and in the cognitive penetration literature (Silins 2016).

I’ll sometimes talk of ‘perceptual experiences or perceptual judgements’. By the latter, I don’t mean any judgement formed partly on the basis of perception. I mean people’s judgements that they are perceiving something. As I’ll highlight later, there’s debate over whether the two are worth distinguishing, but little hangs on the difference for my purposes. It’s also worth distinguishing these racist perceptions from talk of a ‘racist gaze’ or ‘white gaze’.<sup>6</sup> terms which are used in a more metaphorical sense, referring to kinds of social perspective, rather than people’s perceptual experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Though it’s common to assume there are racist perceptions, this may at first seem controversial. Many views restrict which kinds of mental-state/attitude can be racist.<sup>8</sup> Garcia (1996) thinks only volitional states, such as willing, regarding or desiring, can be racist in a primary sense, with other things being racist in a secondary, derivative sense (see Shelby 2002, and Mills 2003 for

<sup>5</sup>As well as the highly impactful specific cases of this, there is some empirical evidence suggesting this sort of mistake is a pervasive one (Payne 2001).

<sup>6</sup>For two examples of philosophical work that do regard a kind of seeing, or racist gaze, as central to racism, see Ngo (2017: chs 2, 4) and Coakley (2022).

<sup>7</sup>Of course, it may be that these concepts refer to some kind of ‘collective seeing’. I find this ambiguity particularly prevalent with talk about the ‘white gaze’ (Keval 2016: ch 4; Fanon 2008: 87).

<sup>8</sup>I use attitude in a broad sense to mean mental states with at least some representational, (in this case representing race) element. This will include beliefs, but also attitudes like race-based desires, dispositions to fear, etc. Naturally, racist attitudes will be a subset of racial attitudes, and I discuss different accounts of the racist-making feature in Section II.

critical discussion). Also, many philosophers see beliefs as the key racist attitude (Appiah 1990; Shelby 2014), and it's controversial whether perceptions, even perceptual judgements, are beliefs.

However, despite the appearance of controversy here, the existence of racist perceptions is perfectly compatible with all these views. Before I highlight why, it's important to note that, while I'll undermine this key reason for thinking racist perceptions *don't* exist, I won't offer a knock-down argument that they do. This paper is broadly conditional in its aims. Given that an increasing number of people seem to take there to be racist perceptions, it's worth exploring what these would have to be and, if they exist, what this would tell us about theories of racism. Even if we want to reject the claim that there truly are racist perceptions, we ought to know what we're rejecting.

So, why is it that even views which narrowly restrict the type of racist attitudes are compatible with racist perceptions? Well, here we must distinguish two senses in which some feature can be racist. It can be *racist-making* or it can *manifest racism*.<sup>9</sup> With the former, in virtue of having them one becomes racist or 'more racist' (as Liao and Hansen (2023) highlight, we typically treat racism as a gradable quality). These are the kinds of feature typically at issue in the racism debate. Racial hatred, warped stereotypical beliefs about racial groups, etc., are common candidates for racist-making features.

Things can also be racist in a different sense: they might 'manifest' racism. Consider a person with a racial hatred who *thereby* comes to hate some particular racial-group-member. We'd naturally describe their hatred of the individual as racist, but in doing so we're not saying that 'hating person X' is racist-making.<sup>10</sup> One could come to hate this person in all sorts of non-racist ways. Instead, we're saying that, in this case, their hatred *manifests* their racism. While manifesting requires 'being (at-least-part-)caused by', it requires more than just any causal link. There will be *right kind of way* considerations here. Someone's racial hatred could cause hatred of a particular person in a deviant way. It could cause someone who learns of the racist's hatred to throw a brick at them, which in turn causes the racist to hate this person. But this hatred of the individual would not *manifest* racism, even though their racial hatred played a causal role in bringing it about. See Turri (2011) for a discussion of the concept of manifestation in the way I'm using it.

It's also important to distinguish genuinely racist (racist-making and racist-manifesting) features from *racist tells*. These may not be racist themselves, but give us strong evidence of racism. For example, the belief 'I've never met a

<sup>9</sup>See the discussion in Scott (2025).

<sup>10</sup>Whereas their hatred for the *group* is a plausible candidate for a racist-making attitude. Note that in general, attitudes towards particular group members will be more plausibly thought of as *racism-manifesting* attitudes than racist-making ones. As perceptual experiences will be of particular group members rather entire racial groups, this provides another reason to think racist perceptions will be *racism-manifesting*.

friendly African' is a racist tell, but is not a racist-making belief and *may* not manifest racism (after all, someone expressing it might add: 'but that's trivially true, I've never met any Africans'). A racist tell just lets us *reasonably assume* there are racist attitudes in the vicinity. Note the importance of 'strong evidence' and 'reasonably assume'. Something is not a racist tell if it only gives a small amount of evidential support. While wearing a Nazi swastika out in public, or certain uses of slurs and other racist language, would justify the response 'That's racist!' (in the racist-tells sense), it would not be right to call someone's listening to Wagner, racist. Even if there was some small statistical relationship there, this wouldn't be significant enough to make it a reasonable assumption that the music fan had racist attitudes.

The restrictions on the attitude-type in theories of racism are restrictions on racist-making attitudes. However, I argue that if there are racist perceptions, these will be *racism-manifesting*, rather than being *racist-making*. For a particular perceptual experience to be racist-making, one would have to become racist purely in virtue of having it. But clearly, having a perceptual experience with certain content needn't make one more racist by itself. This holds even if it's a false perception with a racial element, like seeing a gun in the hands of a black suspect holding a phone. Someone could have an identical (in content) perceptual experience in any number of non-racist ways. Someone who projects an illusion of a gun into a black person's hand would not thereby make people who fell for the illusion any more racist, despite the fact that they're causing people to have false perceptions with racial content. While having a certain 'perceptual bias' that disposes one to misperceive racially, might make one racist (or more racist), the mere content of a perceptual experience cannot.

One might object: But what about extreme examples, like seeing someone of a certain race as bug-like or simian?<sup>11</sup> The same holds true: the content is not enough to settle the question of whether the perception was genuinely racist. If the perceiver had merely suffered a traumatic zoo incident, and ever since would hallucinate ape-like features on random strangers (unconnected to race), the particular instances need not be genuinely racist perceptions. On the other hand, if the misperception came from a general attitude regarding people of that group as more simian, then these perceptions would seem racist (as they would manifest the racism of this general attitude).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Note that we're interested only in the cases where this is genuinely perceptual, e.g. one's visual experience of the person is distorted to appear more bug-like. We're not talking about metaphorical cases e.g. where 'seeing them as bug like' means something more like regarding them as having the moral worth of a bug.

<sup>12</sup>While racist perceptions have to manifest some more general racial attitude, one might wonder whether they could be racist-making *as well* (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this interesting thought). Consider an analogy with racial-hatred on a view like Garcia's: Imagine someone hating a specific person 'on account of their race' (i.e., in a way that manifests

Now, racist perceptions cannot be dismissed as *merely* racist tells. We can distinguish between genuinely racist cases, e.g. the racist policeman who *thereby* comes to see a gun in the hand of a black suspect, from non-racist cases, e.g. the projected illusion. Many kinds of racial misperception will act as racist tells, but a subset of these will be *genuine* racist perceptions.

On this manifestation view, it's necessary that racist perceptions have been distorted by a person's racism, e.g. their racist attitudes (whether doxastic or non-doxastic). Further support for this view comes from the fact that we can get right-kind-of-way problems. If someone's racial hatred causes them, *deviantly*, to have a racial misperception e.g. because of some racist demon that projects illusions to match people's racial hatred, this wouldn't be a racist perception. Though the perceiver is racist, and their racism played a causal role, the attitude would not *manifest* their racism.<sup>13</sup>

We can also get *luckily true* racist perceptions. If someone's stereotypical view of black people distorted their perceptual experience such that they saw a fuzzy, indeterminate percept in a black person's hand as a chicken leg, this might seem racist even if they were luckily correct. Jointly, the fact that perceptions can be luckily correct yet still racist, and that we can be (un)luckily wrong (e.g. with illusions) in cases with the same content without the perceptions being racist, highlights that what's at issue here is a matter of the process of formation (and its distortion) rather than the content.

Of course, not every racist perception need be the perception of a full-blown racist. It's common to think that racism is gradable (Liao and Hansen 2023) so being 'a racist' will involve meeting some threshold. A person could still have certain racist attitudes without meeting this threshold, particularly if they are less significant racist attitudes. Blum's (2002: 43) insights about the moral asymmetry of racism may be relevant here. Similarly, I have argued elsewhere that the importance of power to racism should be understood as something that merely affects its significance rather than being a necessary condition (Scott 2022). So, a perception could manifest racism just by coming from a racist attitude in the right way, rather than coming from a full-blown racist perceiver.

So far, I've argued that racist perceptions are perceptions that manifest racism. However, there's still a question over whether the at-issue cases are really *perceptions*. This broadly concerns debates around the boundaries

a more general disposition to racial hatred). While this manifests racism, might it not also be racist-making? I find this rather implausible, even for racial hatred. Take a person with racial hatred for blacks (they dislike every black person they meet). Such a view would predict that, *necessarily*, they are more racist for every black person they've met. But surely it's not some necessary truth that the racist who's met ten black people is less racist than the one who's met eleven.

<sup>13</sup>For more on deviance and manifestation, see Davidson (2001), Turri (2011), and Sosa (2015).

between perception and cognition. Much argument in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science concerns how to draw this border, such as whether it concerns differences in cognitive architecture (Green 2020) or differences in the format of representations (Block 2023). Whatever boundary there is, it can often seem to be fuzzy, with elements of perception affecting cognition and elements of cognition seeming to affect perception. I'll argue this debate gives further weight to my view.

## II.2 Cognitive penetration or racist inference

When it comes to the question of whether 'racist perceptions' are truly perceptual, there are two paths one might take. First, we might think that the perceptual *experience* manifests racism. This is to take the intuitions at their most literal. Second, one could argue that there's nothing intrinsic to the perception that's racist, but through problematic cognition/ inferences, the *perceptual judgements* (judgements like 'I'm seeing X') manifest racism. To illustrate how this might look with weapon-misperception, let's imagine a policeman who has the (racist-making) attitude of racial hatred towards blacks. On the *racist perception* view, this racial hatred causes the policeman to have the visual experience of the black man holding a gun, rather than the phone it in fact is. On the *racist inference* view, the policeman has the visual experience of a phone, or some indeterminate visual experience that is neither phone nor gun, but then their racial-hatred throws off their (likely subconscious) inferences, and so they judge that they're seeing a gun. For ease, I'm assuming a clear distinction between the perceptions and the judgements, but if the borders are more... 'fuzzy', then the distortion likely has both perceptual and cognitive elements.

Taking the *racist perception* view likely commits one to an endorsement of cognitive penetration (or top-down influence), where the perceptual faculties can be hijacked by racist biases.<sup>14</sup> This will certainly be the case for perceptions distorted through paradigmatic racist attitudes like racial hatred or ideological racist beliefs. However, an interesting edge case concerns the possibility of perceptual biases that do not originate in representational attitudes about race. Examples might include what Johnson (2020) calls 'truly-implicit' biases, or cases where the perceptual system becomes better 'tuned' to people of certain racial groups through exposure (Munton 2019). If there are such biases, this raises the question of whether they'd be the sort of thing we should count as racist attitudes.<sup>15</sup> We might think racist-making attitudes must be *about*

<sup>14</sup>The move towards thinking of certain seemingly racist perceptions as brought about through cognitive penetration has been spearheaded by Siegel (2017).

<sup>15</sup>If so, then the term 'attitude' might be a little misleading, and one should mentally replace it with talk of racist-making 'mental-states' or 'constructs'. That said, I favour a broad view of what makes for an 'attitude'.

*race* through being representational. If so, these particular biases wouldn't be racist-making (nor give rise to 'racist perceptions'). It's common to think that there are some minimal racial biases that can't themselves make someone racist (Levy 2017), so this shouldn't be surprising. But alternatively, one might think that non-representational biases can indeed constitute a kind of racist attitude (though we may balk at calling it an 'attitude'. See the previous footnote.). In that case, they would be able to generate racist perceptions, but in a way where the influence is not top-down.

Now, cognitive penetration is controversial in the perception literature.<sup>16</sup> If perceptions are themselves vulnerable to being thrown-off by, say, irrational beliefs, then their epistemic status (as an unjustified justifier) is called into question.<sup>17</sup> Some may prefer the *racist inference view* precisely because it doesn't require cognitive penetration; the effects of bias kick in later after the visual experience has occurred.<sup>18</sup> However, whether the things we've been calling 'racist perceptions' come from distorted perception or distorted inference/cognition, both the *racist perception* and *racist inference* views (and any fuzzy middle-option) largely converge on their implications for theories of racism. They lend weight to my manifestation account by viewing these cases as perceptions/perceptual judgements that have been epistemically distorted by racist attitudes.

### II.3 Distorting attitudes and racist attitudes

If we take seriously the intuition that there is something racist about the perceptual judgements in these paradigmatic cases (whether due to a racially distorted perceptual experience or a racially distorted inference), this will have an important bearing on accounts of racism. Either way, an intuitive condition on something being a 'racist perception', as opposed to any other kind of dodgy perception, is that it's distorted by racist attitudes. This precludes both random glitches and even non-racial biases from being the sole cause of racist perception. Imagine a policeman prone to random glitches that cause him to hallucinate objects in people's hands... one day a banana, one day a teacup,

<sup>16</sup>For an empirical case against cognitive penetration, see Firestone and Scholl (2016). Adherents of cognitive penetration in the philosophical literature include McGrath (2013), Siegel and Silins (2015), Siegel (2017), and Stokes (2021).

<sup>17</sup>Worries about the threat of cognitive penetration are articulated by Fodor, who argues that the encapsulation of the perceptual system is good news for epistemology (Fodor 1984). That cognitive penetration causes epistemic downgrade is argued for by Lyons (2011), McGrath (2013), Siegel (2017) and others. That said, some argue that the direct influence of biasing states like desires, wishful thinking, etc. causes beliefs to be unjustified but not perceptual experiences (Huemer 2013; Long 2018).

<sup>18</sup>Particularly with regard to racist perceptions, one might be sceptical whether properties related to racial groups are sufficiently thin to really be directly perceived rather than inferred. See Siegel and Byrne (2017) for a helpful discussion of perceiving rich or thin concepts.

one day a gun. If on one of the days he hallucinates the gun, it happens to be a black person whose hands he sees it in, this would not make for a racist perception. There's no racial bias here, no racist attitude hijacking perception. In such cases (assuming we know this), we would not take it to be a case of racist perceiving.

The same goes for perceptual distortion coming from *non-racial* biases. Imagine a policeman so traumatized by a shooting that he regularly hallucinates guns in people's hands. This happens irrespective of race. Even on the odd occasion where he wrongly sees a black person holding a gun, we do not intuitively take this to be a case of 'racist perception'. Compare this to cases where the distortion comes from someone's racial hatred or fear, or a belief that black men are violent. These are clearly paradigmatic cases of racist perception.

So, in order to count as a racist perception, a perceptual judgement seems to need to be distorted by a racist attitude. Another thing worth highlighting is that when we speak of distortion, we mean distorted from truth or accuracy. This shows that there's an epistemic element to racist perception: These perceptions are caused (at least in part) by the distorting influence of our racist attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

The debate around what it takes for a person (and similarly, their attitudes) to be racist can be conceived of as a three-way fight between socio-political accounts, moral accounts, and epistemic accounts (though it's not uncommon to hear it framed as a two-way fight between moral and political views, e.g. Mitchell-Yellin (2018), with epistemic accounts overlooked).<sup>20</sup> All broadly agree that racism has two key elements: Being about race in some way, and being criticizable in some way. Their major difference is in the way the fundamental, *necessary* criticizability is accounted for. Socio-political accounts think racists are ultimately criticizable in terms of their relationship to racially problematic socio-political structures and systems (Urquidez 2020a; Shelby 2014; Haslanger 2017). Moral accounts claim racists must be criticizable in terms of their immoral character and immoral attitudes (Garcia 1996; Blum 2002; Glasgow 2009; Peebles 2024). Epistemic accounts think racists are always criticizable in terms of distortion from truth e.g. through irrational, evidence-resistant beliefs (Appiah 1990; Arthur 2007) or other biasing attitudes (Scott 2025).

<sup>19</sup>That said, perhaps some racist perceptual judgements could accurately represent the world despite the distorting influence. Consider a policeman racially hallucinating a gun in the black suspect's hand, but where, if he'd focused more clearly, he'd have seen that the suspect really was carrying a gun. This could be a kind of racist perceptual Gettier case. For ease, I'll continue to focus on cases where the perception misrepresents the world.

<sup>20</sup>There are other ways of dividing up accounts of racism, and none will have perfectly clean cuts, with certain views sitting awkwardly on the borders. The reason for dividing the views up by the necessary, criticisable feature of racism they posit, is that these posits can cause difficulty in accounting for racist perceptions.

Now, not all accounts are quite so easily sorted into these categories. Some will be hybrid, and others pluralist. Hybrid views draw multiple necessary conditions for racism from across these categories. Some moral accounts may also require an epistemological failing in order to hold agents morally blameworthy. Shelby (2014), though advancing a political account, thinks racism has an epistemic component. Fischer (2021) advances a moral/political account requiring having the kind of character that would fit a racial-supremacist state. Pluralist accounts, on the other hand, simply posit different kinds of racism. The most common type of pluralist view is to think that personal racism and institutional racism are separate, with neither being primary and neither being reducible to the other. Ture and Hamilton (1967) are often ascribed such a view, though Garcia (2023) offers some good reason to doubt this.

Despite pluralist/hybrid views, it is still useful to focus on the moral/epistemic/socio-political divide for the purposes of this paper. The arguments I give will still bear on these views. Pluralist views still have to say what the conditions of personal racism are, even if they think there are other, separate kinds too. Where pluralist accounts fail to meet the desiderata I put forward in the next section, we should just bear in mind that this only undermines the personal part of the view, but need not affect the part that applies to, say, racist institutions. Hybrid views, on the other hand, will be even more vulnerable to my arguments. I'll be raising a problem for a variety of purported *necessary conditions* on racist attitudes. As hybrid accounts require multiple different necessary conditions, the problems compound.

### III. Implications for theories of racism

#### III.1 Racial misperception and racist tells

Genuinely racist perceptions, I've argued, are best thought of as perceptions that *manifest* racism; formed through the distorting influence of racist attitudes. This means that knowing with *certainty* that some perception is a racist perception requires knowing how it was formed. Sadly, we rarely, if ever, do. Why, then, does it seem so commonsense to describe certain racial misperceptions as *racist* perceptions? The natural answer, given the distinction I drew earlier, is that certain kinds of racial misperception will be *racist tells*. This would mean that they're the sort of things we might *reasonably assume* are genuine racist perceptions, or at the very least, if there's a *tendency* towards misperceiving in that kind of way, we'd reasonably assume that at least some of the instances were genuinely racist perceptions.

So, we can draw out the following principle:

*Perceptual Tell: When one has a significant tendency towards certain kinds of racial-misperception, it is reasonable to assume that they have a racist attitude distorting (at least some of) these perceptions.*

Now, I've made the principle weaker than I might have by restricting it to 'significant tendencies', i.e., kinds of regular, somewhat reliable racial misperception. These are the cases that will generate the strongest intuitions that there is racist perceiving going on. Exactly how significant I'll leave open, but it's clear that at some level of significance (i.e., sufficiently frequent, sufficiently reliable), a tendency to misperceive racially would strike us as a racist tell. Consider again, e.g. a particularly severe, sweeping tendency to hear black voices as aggressive, or a strikingly prominent racial bias in weapon-perception.

Of course, as I highlighted earlier, any *individual* case of a racial misperception could be caused by non-racial distorting attitudes or merely be a freak accident, and some will find it contentious to claim that some single, particular misperception will ever provide sufficient evidence of racism (be a racist tell) on its own. To be clear, I'm not saying that individual misperceptions cannot be racist tells too (one's bar for the 'significant tendencies' might be set low enough that a single, extreme racial misperception counts). I'm just focusing discussion on 'patterns of misperception' because these will be the most clear-cut cases.

Any view that doesn't vindicate *Perceptual Tell* comes under pressure. It would imply that the common practice of treating certain kinds of racial misperception as racist tells is irrational. This would be deeply unintuitive, and give us significant reason to doubt its usefulness as a descriptive definition. So, complying with Perceptual Tell is a desideratum on a descriptive account of racism.

An account of racism complies with Perceptual Tell when it gets the result that:

1. Having a tendency to racially misperceive in certain ways strongly suggests that some of those misperceptions are racist perceptions.
2. And therefore, there is some racist attitude causing the racist perceptions.

The restriction to 'in certain ways' might raise an eyebrow here. It's doubtful that a full account of the relevant ways can be given at this stage that wouldn't beg the question against certain views of racism (as I'll highlight in II.3, some views might deny that there are black-to-white racist perceptions). However, at a minimum, it is clear that there are some tendencies to racially misperceive that shouldn't come out on any view as racist tells, e.g. a relative tendency to fail to perceive dark-skinned people in dark places. I'll say more about potential restrictions on the kind of tendency in II.3 when I discuss ideology-based views of racism. For now, I'll focus on cases that seem clear-cut, e.g. the seeing someone of a certain race's actions as aggressive, or misperceiving them holding a weapon.

### III.2 Irrationality and immorality

The Perceptual Tell desideratum is bad news for theories of racism that make *irrationality* or *immorality* a necessary feature of racism. For example, Appiah (1990) thinks personal racism requires *evidence-resistant* beliefs, i.e., beliefs that are (or are disposed to be) maintained against the available evidence. Similarly, Arthur (2007) claims that racist attitudes must be epistemically irrational attitudes of racial hostility or indifference. Of course, the idea that racist attitudes are a kind of irrational attitude about race is a pervasive one that extends beyond the philosophy of race.<sup>21</sup>

These views will fail to satisfy Perceptual Tell. Of the potential racial attitudes that can play this perceptual distorting role, only a minority would be racist attitudes. Remember, to satisfy Perceptual Tell, one needs to be justified in inferring, on the basis of certain tendencies towards racial misperception, that:

*DA:* There are some racial *distorting attitudes* acting upon (at least some of) the perceptions.

and

*RA:* Those attitudes are *racist attitudes*.

Satisfying Perceptual Tell involves being able to reasonably jump from DA to RA. However, this means that any account of racism which predicts that too few racial distorting attitudes are also racist attitudes will fail to satisfy Perceptual Tell.

Now, all major accounts of racism will have some story to tell about how a person's racist attitudes *could* distort perception. What many struggle to do, I argue, is provide a story that can be read backwards; one that lets us reasonably assume of racial misperceptions, that they really were caused by a racist attitude.

With respect to the 'irrationality views', RA will not be a reasonable inference from DA. Distorting racial attitudes is going to be far cheaper than racist attitudes. A racial attitude can be distorting just by being false.<sup>22</sup> It might well be reasonable to assume, on the basis of some tendency towards racial misperception, that the perceiver had some *false* or *misleading* attitude about race. However, this does not license the further jump to thinking that the

<sup>21</sup>For instance, it was highly prevalent in psychology (Allport 1954; Schuman and Harding 1964), and this orthodoxy is often remarked on in the ethics of belief literature, e.g. Basu (2019). It's typical to think of irrationality and evidence resistance through an epistemic internalist lens (Langsam 2008). However, the same problems I highlight should arise on externalist views too.

<sup>22</sup>In fact, the problem may be considerably greater if racially biasing mental states can even include things like gerrymandered priors. See Munton (2019) for an important discussion of how unjust environments might bring about racially biased priors, which in turn might distort our perceptions.

attitude is one of hostility or indifference (Arthur 2007) or that the attitude is an evidence-resistant belief about the morally salient characteristics of certain races [as on Appiah's view of extrinsic racism (Appiah 1990)]. These are very particular kinds of distorting attitudes, and it would be irrational to assume that a perceiver had one of these when there are so many other attitudes that could be distorting the perception. Evidence that something falls within a large set provides scant evidence that it falls within a much smaller subset. So, on these views, a pattern of racial misperception would not by itself provide any good reason to think that any of the perceptions were 'racist perceptions'. In particular cases there might be independent, contextual factors that make it reasonable to infer RA of some particular person. One might have independent evidence that some perceiver is racist, and this combined with some pattern of racial misperception *might* lead us to reasonably assume some of these were racist perceptions. However, this would not be enough to make a view comply with Perceptual Tell. To vindicate this, the misperception *itself* needs to be good evidence of racism.

The same problem affects moral theories to an even greater degree. These accounts typically centre around negatively charged immoral racial attitudes; antipathy or inferiorization (Blum 2002), ill-will/disregard (Garcia 1996; Peebles 2024), disrespect (Glasgow 2009), and the like. But for these accounts, inferring RA from a tendency to misperceive seems like an even greater leap. Again, misleading attitudes are cheap. For any pattern of racial misperception, there will be a large set of potential distorting attitudes.<sup>23</sup> The subset of distorting attitudes that have the specific racist-making property advanced by any of these moral views will be much smaller. It would be irrational to assume, given just some pattern of racial misperception, that this misperception must be caused by volitional states constituting morally vicious disregard. We'd need strong independent reasons to think the perceiver had the racist attitudes in order to make this assumption reasonable. So, these views seem to fail to vindicate Perceptual Tell. Blum's and Garcia's views are particularly vulnerable to this, as these narrower views hold that racism is a particularly serious kind of moral failing, an even smaller subset of the potential misleading attitudes.

Also, note that on plausible accounts of moral responsibility, being morally culpable for beliefs may also require being epistemically irrational.<sup>24</sup> This could mean that moral views that posit beliefs as the racist-making attitudes inherit the problems of the epistemic accounts on top of their own.

<sup>23</sup>We can see this in how many accounts of personal racism tell different, plausible stories about what the racist-making attitudes are. Also, consider just how many different kinds of mental state could plausibly perform the distorting role (beliefs, desires, implicit biases, salience structures, etc.).

<sup>24</sup>For example, Begby (2021: ch 10) notes it's common to think that moral responsibility for beliefs depends on what we can be epistemically held to account for knowing. See also Rosen (2003) and Fricker (2016).

I've argued that a descriptive definition of racism ought to respect the treating of certain kinds of racial misperception as racist tells. While there's good reason to doubt that any account with a moral necessary condition can do this, it's worth noting that the broader and weaker the moral account, the better it will do in this regard. If a view sets a sufficiently low moral bar, it would become more likely that they could account for racist perception. Of the ones I've highlighted, a disrespect account (e.g. [Glasgow's 2009](#)) might have the best chance as it allows for a much broader range of racist attitudes and can account for at least some cases of positive racism. That said, even on this more expansive account, it still seems doubtful that enough distorting attitudes are going to be disrespectfully held racial attitudes to countenance the jump from DA to RA.<sup>25</sup> Various kinds of subtle, psychological bias do not seem to be naturally described as 'disrespectful', and [Glasgow \(2009\)](#) explicitly avoids tying the disrespect analysis too closely to a particular account of disrespect, leaving it an open question whether these attitudes would be 'immorally disrespectful'.<sup>26</sup>

### III.3 Ideology and bias

Socio-political accounts think of racism as primarily a matter of broad racial systems and societal structures. Different accounts frame this in different ways. Some think of racism as fundamentally a kind of ideology ([Shelby 2003; 2014](#)). Others as a racially oppressive social system that sorts people into roles of dominant/subjugated or human/inhuman ([Grosfoguel 2016](#)).<sup>27</sup> Despite the differences, political views agree that racism, even personal racism, has an external condition: a connection to things in the surrounding socio-political environment part-determines when a person, or their attitudes, is racist.

As I noted in I.1, socio-political accounts of racism need not be advanced as direct competitors to the moral or epistemic accounts. However, some may take socio-political views of racism to provide a unifying view of racism.<sup>28</sup> If this is the aim, then it matters whether these views clash with our intuitions about racist perceptions. So, this is the lens through which I'll be examining

<sup>25</sup>Note that even if we had a radically expansive moral outlook, like the Cliffordian view that beliefs held against the evidence are always immoral ([Clifford 1877](#)), even this would only elevate a moral view to the plausibility of the epistemic views I argued against.

<sup>26</sup>It seems to me that on the folk, intuitive sense of 'immoral disrespect', most of the potentially biasing attitudes would not be genuinely morally disrespectful. That said, while [Glasgow](#) takes care not to force on us a particular account of disrespect, his preferred understanding of it is incredibly broad (see, e.g. [Glasgow 2016](#)). As I've argued elsewhere, it seems so broad that it fails to be a genuinely moral condition at all ([Scott 2025](#)). And [Glasgow \(2016\)](#) admits that it requires taking on controversial ethical commitments.

<sup>27</sup>[Bonilla Silva \(1997\)](#) somewhat blends the two, viewing racism as the ideological component of a racial social-system.

<sup>28</sup>For example, views on which racism fundamentally *is* a system of oppression (or an ideology), will often hold that things become racist through reinforcing, or making use of ([Cabezas 2023](#)), the system/ideology.

them. It's worth further highlighting that I'm only considering these views through a descriptive lens. Some people advance socio-political accounts with revisionary motivations, in which case they may not be as worried if their view fails to get the right results on racist perception, as long as it does well by some pragmatic aim like helping to fight racism.<sup>29</sup> While it's outside the scope of this project to argue against revisionism, even revisionist accounts can't depart too far from a descriptive core, and whether revisionist definitions can be easily implemented will be affected by how well the revised concept fits with ordinary usage. While failing to account for the way we think about racist perceptions will not provide a knock-down argument against a revisionist view, it will still apply some pressure, and make clear what the bullets are that these accounts must bite.

So, how well do socio-political accounts capture racist perception? Well, if being racist is solely a matter of whether something reflects or reinforces an ideology, then two racial misperceptions with the same content will be equally racist regardless of how they were formed. As I highlighted in Section I, we should reject accounts with this consequence.

However, an ideology-based view of racism, particularly the kind advanced by Shelby, seems to perform better than many. On such a view, people are made racist through believing in line with ideologies, defined as:

*“a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgements that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations”* (Shelby 2003)

As we can see, on Shelby's view a racist attitude is one that likely plays a truth-distorting role in the service of racist ideology. Shelby's account is largely non-moralized so, unlike on other views, there is no condition that the attitude must be immorally held.<sup>30</sup> This account seems to much more easily capture RA, and thus comply with Perceptual Tell. It seems a reasonable inference from some pattern of racial distortion, to assume that someone has some racially distorting attitude.

Of course, the key question is whether it's reasonable to assume, on the basis that someone has a racially distorting attitude, that they have a racially distorting attitude *which functions to reinforce ideologies*? A proponent of ideology theory might well argue that this is reasonable... given some assumptions about which perceptions generate the intuitions of racism. Remember, Perceptual Tell requires that a view predict:

1. Having a tendency to racially misperceive in certain ways strongly suggests that some of those misperceptions are racist perceptions.

<sup>29</sup>See Mitchell-Yellin (2018) for a discussion of the pragmatic aim.

<sup>30</sup>'Largely' in that racist attitudes will still be morally significant, but need not be immorally held.

2. And therefore, that there is some racist attitude causing the racist perceptions.

The ‘certain ways’ becomes relevant here. The kinds of paradigmatic cases I’ve used to highlight the common-sense intuitions have involved pervasive, harmful societal stereotypes. Weapon misperception with regard to black suspects, the misperception of aggression in black voices, or associating the smell of Indian curry with lower house value. These kinds of distortion all plausibly serve an unjust social function. So, a view like Shelby’s certainly seems to get the right result on the most clear-cut cases.

However, many will want a view that is able to account for a broader range of racist perceptions. As Shelby’s view requires that the attitudes distorting racist perceptions contribute to racist ideologies, this rules out those that have no effect on, or run counter to, racist ideology. In this regard, ideology views will imply controversial kinds of one-way condition. If the pervading racist ideology is one of white supremacy, it may have to rule out black-to-white racism (and potentially racism between different oppressed groups too). This may appeal to some. Proponents of prejudice plus power accounts of racism, for example, treat this as a desirable consequence of the view (Barndt 2007). It’s beyond the scope of this paper to wade deeply into this debate, but I agree with those who see these requirements as an arbitrary, unnecessary feature (Blum 2002; Taylor 2013). It’s also worth noting that this is a feature more associated with revisionary views than descriptive ones (Urquidez 2020a,b).

In that regard, the view that seems best suited to comply with Perceptual Tell is a minimal, bias-centred view of racism, like the epistemic view I advance in Scott (2025). On this view, a racist attitude is nothing more than a kind of distorting racial attitude. As I argued there:

*“A racist attitude is a partly cognitive attitude about racial groups, which plays a truth-distorting role in forming other representational attitudes about racial groups.”*

As should be clear from this, the bias-centred approach to racism will certainly vindicate the key intuitions around racist perception. RA almost falls out of DA on such a view. If we take it that someone has a distorting racial attitude, then we should of course think this is a racist attitude (for that’s basically all a racist attitude is). And so, upon observing any significant tendency towards racial misperception, it would be reasonable to treat this as a matter of racist perception.

The view places few restrictions on the *type* of attitude that can act as a racist attitude. As long as it can be considered a partly cognitive attitude about race/racial groups, it is able to count. This will include ‘mind-to-world’ representational attitudes, like the desires/volitional states focused on by certain moral views. It will also include the ‘world-to-mind’ representational attitudes like beliefs, credences, etc.

Additionally, rather than place requirements on the aetiology of a racist attitude, as more stringent epistemic accounts do (e.g. those that require racist attitudes to be irrationally formed), this sort of view (like ideology views) takes racist attitudes to be defined by what they do, not how they came about. Racist attitudes are just racial attitudes that are disposed to distort the way we think about, feel about, and *see* people from certain racial groups.

Finally, such a view imposes no one-way conditions on racial attitudes, nor any other restriction on which races and which stereotypes count as 'properly' racist. As noted, this feature is not universally sought after, but many (and I suspect, most) will regard it as a positive feature of the view. It leaves open questions about which forms of racial misperception are 'significant' enough to count as racist, so the account is not strictly speaking incompatible with a desire for a more restricted view.

Of course, there will be more to say about each of the views of racism I've discussed in this paper. My aim here is not to offer a total defence, or a refutation, of any of them. Nonetheless, in as much as we care about vindicating talk of racist perception, it seems clear that bias-centred views and, to a lesser extent, ideology views, are the ones we should be drawn towards.

#### IV. Conclusion

Cases of apparent racist perception are becoming increasingly studied by analytic philosophers. So far, most of this attention has been in the philosophy of mind, in debates around whether they involve cognitive penetration or unconscious inference and cognition. I drew upon these debates to offer a new account of racist perceptions: they are perceptual experiences (or perceptual judgments) that *manifest* racism through being formed by the distorting effects of racist attitudes. I then drew out various implications of this theory for the debates about the nature of racism. I argued that this account implies a desideratum on theories of racism: *Perceptual Tell*. A descriptively adequate theory of racism should predict that common kinds of racial misperception should act as reliable racist tells. I then argued that accounts of racism that require racist attitudes to be irrational or immoral will fail to satisfy this desideratum. Bias centred approaches, and, to a lesser extent, ideology views, will be able to satisfy the desideratum. In as much as we care about getting an account of racism that vindicates talk of racist perceptions, these are the accounts we should prefer.

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