

Merriam-Webster's Attempt to De-Racist-ify Blacks by Definition

"And [God] made from one every nation of people to live on all the face of the earth..." (The Apostle Paul at Athens).¹

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (MWD) recently received a letter by a Kennedy Mitchum, objecting that the dictionary definition of "racism" needs to be expanded to include a *systematic* aspect because, as she said, "*prejudice combined with social and institutional power...is a system of advantage based on skin color.*"² She also recalled examples from her own experiences, stating for example that at Drake University she faced "*microaggressions [because] she was surrounded by so many white people who didn't acknowledge her presence [and] questioned her ability.*" Some even "*disagreed*" with her.³

In reply, Editor at Large Peter Skolowski said in an interview that they are now working to revise the entry which, at present, defines racism as "*a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities, and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.*"⁴ He further said, "*this entry has not been revised in decades...While our focus will...be on reflecting the real world usage of the world and not on promoting any particular viewpoint, we have concluded that omitting any mention of the systematic aspects of racism promotes a certain viewpoint itself.*"⁵

For several reasons, I find specifics of the above account to be deeply problematic to any agenda seeking to resolve racism. Firstly, Kennedy both assumed the motives of her classmates and attacked their moral character and intellectual acuity; neither of which she confirmed. Virtually **all** people at times have experiences similar to the apparent snubs she calls "microaggressions" (MA). Secondly, she inadvertently applied the same *systematic* methods that she claims to decry, by depriving whites (solely because of their color) of the dignity of either being heard or engaging with her in challenges which, in the name of fairness, can only be discussed on a level playing field. To the extent that she discourages such conversations, she is committing the fallacy, *begging the question*. Thirdly, besides omitting *valid specific examples*, neither she nor the MWD editor gave definition to the term "systematic" they employ in this context, nor provide criteria by which to discern whether or not a given setting involves a *systematic* aspect. Fourthly, she quite apparently elevates her preferred redefinition, not merely to fill her desired meaning with greater depth, but to effectively discount altogether the original view (above), thereby muffling whites completely. Fifthly, while she chided whites for defining racism by "*scissors-and-paste*"⁶ methods, both she and Skolowski employ equivocation in their verbiage in such a way as to entrench a *wholesale* dismissal of white perceptions. The logic of this ploy implies that because blacks were both victims in the past, and allegedly are to this day beaten down by *systematic* racism, then, according to the anticipated redefinition, blacks cannot be racist. By stark contrast, whites by that same logic, are actual perpetrators of *systematic* racist oppression. This perceptual straight-jacket conveys a notion hauntingly similar to Nazis attaching a yellow star onto Jewish clothing under the Third-Reich.

Notice by contrast then the words of Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* which begin, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal.*" Now any careful student of history knows that he, and certain other founders of our nation, held slaves; a reality which

¹ Acts 17:26.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/us/merriam-webster-racism-definition.html> (boldface mine).

³ <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/12/merriam-webster-racism-definition>

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>

⁵ Op.cit. (2).

⁶ Ibid.

ignites an understandable sense of shock today. Nevertheless what should be found still *more* shocking (in a positive sense) is NOT that Jefferson failed to live up to his own words, but that he nonetheless allowed them to stand in spite of failing to keep them. My larger point is that, although slavery would not be ended until 80 years later when the Union militia defeated the Confederate militia in the Civil War, neither our *Declaration of Independence* nor our *Constitution* ever enshrined or celebrated slavery in any way at all. Yet the challenge of putting our nation together at its founding was, in reality, a very messy matter. The high level of cooperation required between anti- and pro-slavery colonies was, in fact, beyond reach should the founders have attempted at its very beginning to abolish slavery. It was only by compromise that the level of unity absolutely required to achieve a United States could possibly come into existence consisting back then, as also now, of very imperfect people.

The interchange which begins this paper effectively seeks to overthrow a critical component for constructing our Constitution, which is the biblical doctrine of sin. It is beyond debate, for example, that the separation of powers into three branches of government is grounded on the view that all people everywhere are all sinners. Yet both Mitchum and Skolowsky would effectively (not intentionally) ground society into the racist posture that blacks are, by definition, free from racial inclinations, while whites by contrast are the sole source of societal racial maladies by their very essence. The prospect of where this absurdly naïve view of humanity will eventually lead, is horrifying to ponder.

In addition, when Skolowski said, "*omitting any mention of the systematic aspects of racism promotes a certain viewpoint itself,*" he overlooked the fact that his view cuts both ways. By seeking to elevate "*systematic racism*" to the highest rank, both persons in actuality destroy dialogue by singling whites out as morally inferior. By contrast *biblical* anthropology views each and every person as both created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, Acts 17:26, above) and at the same time, fellow participants in sin (Romans 5:12). It must even further be stated that this second point rests NOT solely on biblical dogma, but also on rational observation. Finally, Skolowski failed in his determination to focus "*on reflecting the real world usage of the world*" by doing the exact opposite; and that in two ways. Firstly he snubbed half the populace solely to placate a minority view. Secondly, he dismissed a self-evidently-valid definition that rightly ranked number 1, that is up to now. In so doing he violated the rational principle that *abstract* definitions should precede *pragmatic* ones which are alleged to logically follow from the former.

Until recently I tempered my concerns by persuading myself that the concept of equal justice under the law is secure. My confidence in the matter however is quickly eroding.