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Change the People or Change the Policy? On the Moral Education of Antiracists

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Abstract: While those who take a “structuralist” approach to racial justice issues are right to call attention to the importance of social practices, laws, etc., they sometimes go too far by suggesting that antiracist efforts ought to focus on changing unjust social systems *rather than* changing individuals’ minds. We argue that while the “either/or” thinking implied by this framing is intuitive and pervasive, it is misleading and self-undermining. We instead advocate for a “both/and” approach to antiracist moral education that explicitly teaches how social structures influence ideas about race and how ideas about race shape, sustain, and transform social structures. Ideally, antiracist moral education will help people see how social change and moral progress depend on the symbiotic relations between individuals and structures. We articulate a conception of “structure-facing virtue” that exemplifies this hybrid approach to illuminate the pivotal role moral education plays in the fight for racial justice.

Introduction

Does moral education contribute to moral progress and social change? When it comes to making progress on racial justice in particular, a prominent skeptical view is that moral education treats the symptoms but not the cause. It aims to change the way individual people think or feel about members of other social groups, but has too often been silent about the “structural,” “systemic,” or “institutional” features of racial hierarchy that produce racial injustice. At the root of the problem of racial injustice—so this critique goes—are sets of social practices, laws, and historical forces that advantage white people in myriad ways. Racial animus and psychological entities like stereotypes are said to flow *from* these more fundamental social structures, not the other way around. In Sally Haslanger’s succinct framing, “the problem isn’t *primarily* in our heads, but in the unjust structures in which we are embedded” (Haslanger 2020, p. 27, emphasis added).

This diagnosis has been taken to suggest that there isn’t much work for moral education to do. If the fundamental source of racial injustice lies in social structures rather than in hearts and minds, then reformists and activists ought to direct their immediate efforts at changing those structures. In several major works, prominent historian and social theorist Ibram X. Kendi has explicitly endorsed such a view, which differs starkly from his earlier optimism about antiracist moral education:

I became a college professor to educate away racist ideas, seeing ignorance as the source of racist ideas, seeing racist ideas as the source of racist policies, seeing mental change as the principal solution, seeing myself, an educator, as the primary solver... (Kendi 2019, 234-5)

Eventually, however, Kendi, came to see things exactly the other way around. He came to believe that antiracist education is ineffective because racist ideas derive not from ignorance but from racist policies and their resulting disparities. The sources of racist ideas, he claims, are large-scale institutions and structures such as slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration. Having soured on the prospects of moral education, Kendi calls on antiracists to tackle discriminatory institutions directly:

Although uplift and persuasion and education have failed, history is clear on what has worked, and what will one day eradicate racist ideas. Racist ideas have always been the public relations arm of the company of racial discriminators and their products: racial disparities. Eradicate the company, and the public relations arm goes down, too. Eradicate racial discrimination, then racist ideas will be eradicated, too. (Kendi 2016, p. 509)

We agree with Kendi that many familiar forms of moral education about race are ineffective. We also suspect he is right that these failures are in part due to moral education about race being overly focused on how we think and feel about one another as individuals (Adams et al. 2008; Kurtis et al. 2015). However, we hold it would be disastrous to abandon the project of antiracist moral education altogether.¹ Rather, moral education about race itself should be *reoriented*. It should provide instruction about the character of social structures and their role in creating and sustaining racial injustice. It should continue to aim at changing hearts and minds, but with emphasis on changing people's feelings and beliefs *about* unjust social structures, racial hierarchy, and racial discrimination.

So, in our view, while Kendi, Haslanger, and others are right to call attention to the importance of social practices, laws, etc., they sometimes go too far by suggesting that the antiracist agenda ought to focus on changing unjust social systems *rather than* changing individuals' minds. We show that although this kind of "either/or" thinking about racial justice and moral education is intuitive and pervasive, it is misleading and self-undermining. We argue that a "both/and" approach,

¹ Despite his earlier (2016, 2019) criticisms of antiracist persuasion and education, Kendi (2022) seems to express agreement, but see especially notes 5 and 7 below.

one which teaches how social structures produce ideas about race and how ideas about race shape, sustain, and transform social structures, will be more fruitful and effective. It will help people see how the possibilities for social change and moral progress depend on the interdependencies between individuals and structures.

This essay builds on our prior work (e.g., Machery et al. 2010; Brownstein 2016, 2018a; Madva 2016a, 2020a; Davidson and Kelly 2018; Brownstein et al. 2022), and others' (e.g., Saul 2018), in several ways, two of which bear emphasizing at the outset. First, it delves into the details of moral education. Earlier calls to appreciate the interdependencies between individuals and structures have overlooked the pivotal role that moral education is positioned to play in the fight for racial justice.² Second, our focus here allows us to get more concrete. Earlier work has spoken much more abstractly about a general need to reorient individuals to promote structural change. In what follows we assemble more detailed proposals—grounded in recent empirical developments in moral psychology—about specific kinds of individual-level changes that moral education can cultivate to advance structural change and moral progress.

We share Kendi's concern that for too long it has been assumed that the goals of moral education are to influence how individuals think and feel about each other (what we'll call *interactional virtue*). In place of this idea, we'll draw on recent developments in moral psychology to argue that another possible aim for moral education, equally important at the very least, is to teach individuals how to think and feel about social structures themselves. Moral education ought to instill what we'll call *structure-facing virtue*. Indeed, although we raise problems for Kendi's repeated insistence on the priority of structural change, we also identify strands of his thought more amenable to a both/and approach, which acknowledge both the necessity of individual transformation and the interdependencies between individual and structural change.

1. Background: Individualism and Structuralism

² We have elsewhere engaged at length with work by Haslanger (e.g., 2015) and others (e.g., Banks and Ford 2009; Anderson 2010; Dixon and Levine 2012) that similarly prioritizes structures over hearts and minds in (c.f. Ayala-López 2017; Haslanger 2017; Madva 2017a; Saul 2017). These exchanges did not revolve specifically around moral education. However, in an essay appearing online after we first submitted this manuscript, Haslanger takes up the topic of education explicitly and develops an insightful account of “education for structural change” (2021, p. 210) and “oppositional consciousness” (citing Mansbridge and Morris 2001) that is broadly consistent with the account we develop here. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for encouraging us to situate this essay in the larger philosophical landscape on these topics.

These conversations about race and education are one instance of a much larger, many-faceted, and long-running debate about the nature of social phenomena and the best way to create change. The questions that drive it are not unique to discussions of racial justice (see §4), but they certainly inform contemporary debates surrounding it. One family of views starts with the idea that the drivers of racial injustice reside primarily in individuals' hearts and minds, in the beliefs, associations, feelings, stereotypes, etc. found within individual people. From this it seems to follow that the most effective or immediate way to make progress toward racial justice would be to change those hearts and minds, through debate, persuasion, and education—moral, scientific, or otherwise (e.g. Zack 2003; cf. Kelly et al. 2010). Another family of views holds that racial injustice depends mainly on institutions, social structures, and other features of the world beyond our heads. From this it seems to follow that the most effective or immediate way to make progress toward racial justice would be to change those racist institutions, social structures, and other outside-the-head factors. To simplify discussion, we'll call the first view *individualism* and the second *structuralism*. Each has a backward-looking component—a set of ideas about the causes of racial injustice—and a forward-looking component—a set of ideas about the best ways to create change and promote justice.

For example, J.L.A. Garcia expresses the backward-looking component of individualism when he writes, “racism consists in vicious attitudes toward people based on their assigned race. From there, it extends to corrupt the people, individual actions, institutional behavior, and system operations it infects” (Garcia 1996, p. 11).³ The forward-looking component of individualism is sometimes taken to follow from such claims about the nature and causes of racism, but is also often defended by appeal to pragmatic considerations, in terms of “what works” to create change. Bayard Rustin, who orchestrated the 1963 civil-rights March on Washington, illustrates this: “what is more important to bring about change as a society, changed individuals or a changed social structure? The answer to that is very simple because if you don't start out with individuals who are determined to change something, you will never get a political consensus” (2021).

³ In this passage, Garcia refers both to constitutive questions about the metaphysical nature of racism and causal questions about the sources and explanations of racial injustice. These questions are related but distinct. We take a both/and approach to both questions: racism can be both individual and structural, and the persistence and dissolution of racial inequality depends on changing both individuals and structures. Our primary concern in this paper is with the latter, causal questions. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging us to more consistently track this important distinction.

Structuralism is arguably the in-vogue view today, however, at least among left-leaning thinkers and activists. Charles Mills expresses its backward-looking component, writing, “the way in which society is economically organized, the particular social roles people occupy, and the dominant socialization patterns, will largely determine people’s beliefs and resulting moral psychologies” (Mills 2003, p. 60). Since, according to structuralists, the fundamental problem is located not in our heads but in things like economic systems and durable, group-level patterns of socialization (which themselves *put* racist ideas in our heads), the forward-looking work of creating change should focus primarily on those systems and patterns. Thus antiracist social psychologists Keith Payne and Heidi Vuletich conclude that “solutions need to focus on structuring the social context, rather than changing the beliefs or values of individuals” (2017, p. 4).

2. A Structuralist Exemplar: Kendi on Racism and Antiracism

Perhaps more than anyone else in recent years, Kendi has brought ideas about both the backward- and forward-looking components of structuralism about race into public discourse. Since he explicitly targets moral education about race for critique, we will focus our discussion on his views. Kendi has written important scholarly (2016), activist-autobiographical (2019), and pedagogical texts (Reynolds and Kendi 2020; Kendi 2022). He has also recently published a #1 *New York Times* bestselling children’s book, *Antiracist Baby* (2020). Despite being written for young children, this book conveys lessons that are representative of the main themes animating his entire body of work, distilling those themes into concise, easily understandable lessons. (We note this to explain why we are discussing a book for babies in a scholarly venue like this.) Kendi’s body of work is notable not just for its breadth and impact but also for the response it has provoked, particularly from politicians, pundits, and parents objecting to the alleged encroachment of Critical Race Theory into present day classrooms. Numerous state and local groups have sought to ban Kendi’s work entirely from public and private schools, in some cases successfully removing it from syllabi and school libraries, and in other cases removing the instructors who would teach it (Cineas 2021; The Miami Herald Editorial Board 2021; Reyes 2021; Crenshaw and Kendi 2022). Indeed, according to the American Library Association, attempts to ban books like Kendi’s reached an all-time high in 2021, only to be exceeded in 2022 (Hines 2022).

We find much to agree with in Kendi's overall body of work. His critique of "colorblind" public policies—as in Chief Justice John Roberts' view that "the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race" (2007)—is deeply persuasive (cf. Anderson 2010, chap. 8). Kendi holds that, *pace* Roberts, racism is not about "mere" discrimination in the sense of individuals treating one another differently based on their race, but is instead about the perpetuation of racial hierarchy. This allows him to cast antiracism specifically as *opposition to* racial hierarchy (Kendi 2019, p. 18). We agree, and our arguments about moral education aim to do justice to this insight.

We remain unconvinced by other elements of Kendi's view, however (§3). These include the backward-looking component of his structuralism, which he describes with characteristic verve:

I was taught the popular folktale of racism: that ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies. But when I learned the motives behind the production of many of America's most influentially racist ideas, it became quite obvious that this folktale, though sensible, was not based on a firm footing of historical evidence. Ignorance/hate → racist ideas → discrimination: this causal relationship is largely ahistorical. It has actually been the inverse relationship—racial discrimination led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate. Racial discrimination → racist ideas → ignorance/hate: this is the causal relationship driving America's history of race relations. (Kendi 2016, p. 9)

Kendi defends this quasi-Marxist view about the priority of racist structures (which Kendi variously calls "racist policies" or "racist discrimination") by examining historical examples. He cites Ibn Khaldun's 1377 descriptions of both the "Negro nations" and the "Slavs" as similar to "wild animals" and as "submissive to slavery." Kendi argues that this kind of rhetoric emerged to justify the slave-trading practices that were already in place in this part of the world (Kendi 2016, p. 20). He goes on to trace the development of these practices and the accompanying rhetoric through the early 1400s when Portugal captured Muslim territory and began to assert its dominance in slave-trading; by 1453, "the inaugural defense of African slave-trading" was completed (Kendi 2016, p. 23). Since this rhetoric and defense of slave-trading was published *after* self-interested political and economic agents had been slave-trading for decades, Kendi concludes that these "inaugural racist ideas... were

a product of, not a producer of, [Portugal’s] Prince Henry’s racist policies concerning African slave-trading” (Kendi 2016, p. 23).

In this discussion Kendi embraces what we have elsewhere identified as a *causal asymmetry* commonly found in left-leaning approaches to racial injustice (Madva 2016a, sec. 3): policies (as Kendi calls them) or social structures (as others often call them) are the causal drivers of racist beliefs, values, and ideas, but racist beliefs and values are themselves largely epiphenomenal, exerting no significant causal influence on the development of policies or structures. Kendi also gives voice to another notion common to the structuralist package of ideas, suggesting that the function of racist ideas is to *conceal* their origins (e.g. Wills 2021). Racist ideas and the rhetoric that expresses them function to distract people, drawing attention away from policy where the genuine causal action is.⁴ It also leads people to mistakenly attribute causal responsibility and moral blame to individuals:

This is the consistent function of racist ideas—and of any kind of bigotry more broadly: to manipulate us into seeing people as the problem, *instead of* the policies that ensnare them. (Kendi 2019, p. 8, emphasis added)

Kendi’s forward-looking prescriptions for making change then proceed from this backward-looking causal/explanatory story. This stands to reason: if policies are the source of the problem, then changing them seems the natural solution. Kendi’s own variation on this theme is a recommendation for “policy change over mental change” (Kendi 2019, p. 230), or as he says in *Antiracist Baby*, “point at policies as the problem, not people” (Kendi 2020, p. 9). Racial injustice will be most effectively addressed by replacing racist policies with alternatives like universal healthcare and economic laws that erode racial hierarchy by promoting the redistribution of wealth. In the wake of such structural changes, the remnants of racism found in hearts and minds will wither as well: “Eradicate racial discrimination” with these kinds of policies, and “racist ideas will be eradicated, too” (Kendi 2016, p. 509).

What action should antiracists take to do this? Kendi says they need to “seize power:”

⁴ Kendi’s view that racist ideas are primarily *effects* rather than *causes* of racist structures may not be consistent with his view that racist ideas function to conceal racist structures. We address this issue in the next section.

Any effective solution to eradicating American racism must involve Americans committed to antiracist policies seizing and maintaining power over institutions, neighborhoods, counties, states, nations—the world... An antiracist America can only be guaranteed if principled antiracists are in power, and then antiracist policies become the law of the land, and then antiracist ideas become the common sense of the people, and then the antiracist common sense of the people holds those antiracist leaders and policies accountable. (Kendi 2016, p. 510)

In urging antiracists to stay focused on this key task of seizing power to implement new policy, Kendi also believes they are wasting their time trying to persuade, educate, or otherwise change the hearts and minds of individual racists. Since, on his view, racist ideas are largely epiphenomenal, even successful efforts at persuasion would make little difference. He writes:

The popular and glorious version of history saying that abolitionists and civil rights activists have steadily educated and persuaded away American racist ideas and policies sounds great. But it has never been the complete story, or even the main story. (Kendi 2016, p. 506)

And again:

Moral and educational suasion breathes the assumption that racist minds must be changed before racist policy, ignoring history that says otherwise. (Kendi 2019, p. 208)

Here and elsewhere, Kendi has asserted that moral education is—at best—a distraction, diverting effort and attention from the “real” antiracist work of changing policies. At worst it is a well-disguised mechanism for maintaining white supremacy.⁵

⁵ Kendi’s most recent book (published while this manuscript was under review), *How to Raise an Antiracist* (2022), is his most explicitly pedagogical and most thoroughly and commendably grounded in up-to-date social science. Notably, this work contains *no* criticisms of efforts to educate or persuade others. Thus his views specifically about the futility of education may have evolved, although, as self-critical, autobiographical, and confessional as Kendi’s monograph is, he does not acknowledge a change of view on this score, nor has he withdrawn the claim that antiracists must first “seize power.” Instead, he continues to insist on the simple priority of policies over people in ways open to the criticisms we raise in what follows, as when he writes in his newest work, “Racist: What is wrong with those people? Antiracist: What is wrong with these racist policies? Different questions lead to different solutions. Racist: changing people. Antiracist: changing policy” (2022, p. 96). One avenue for reinterpreting his earlier criticisms of education in light of his more recent emphasis on education might be to think that he is open to educating *young* minds but pessimistic about trying to

3. Critique: The View from a Both/And Perspective

Not only do we agree with much of the spirit of the structuralist approach, we hold that many of its core ideas are indispensable. When Kendi, one of its most forceful advocates, urges antiracists to highlight that the heart of the problem lies in policies rather than people, one thing we hear is an important admonishment against victim-blaming (Brownstein et al. 2022, pp. 272, 276). By and large, marginalized groups are neither responsible for their status nor merely unlucky. Rather, they are *oppressed*. The flip side of this is that advantaged social groups are typically neither meritorious nor mere beneficiaries of good fortune. They are unjustly *privileged*. We are also largely in agreement with Kendi’s view of racism, that is at its core a system of unjust racial hierarchy. The increased prominence of these structuralist ideas has fueled a much-needed critical examination of widespread but clearly incomplete individualist views about race and racism (e.g. Faucher and Machery 2009; Anderson 2010; Harris 2018; Martín 2020a, b). That said, we have objections to both the backward-looking and forward-looking components of Kendi-style structuralism.

First, we worry that the plausibility of the backward-looking components sometimes stems from a selective reading of history. We can grant, for the sake of argument, that the above discussion of medieval Portugal is correct.⁶ Cases like this, and others to which Kendi draws attention, like the explosion of support for interracial marriage in the United States after its federal legalization in 1967, are plausibly explained by his account. Indeed, the prediction that “once they clearly benefit, most Americans will support and become the defenders of the antiracist policies they once feared” may also be true (Kendi 2019, p. 208). However, there are a great many other historical cases that do not fit this policies-change-ideas picture. *Failed* policies—those that didn’t create the predicted changes in popular ideas, or worse, created backlash—are at least as easy to find as successes. Such failures include the policy changes surrounding post-Civil War Reconstruction, alcohol prohibition and the 18th Amendment, and the politics of abortion in the decades following

educate or persuade adults. However, the idea that young and only young dogs can learn new tricks does not appear in his earlier work, and even now, he writes, “Adults can unlearn racist ideas—and learn antiracist ideas” (2022, p. xx).

⁶ We remain agnostic about this case. On our view, much more would need to be said to establish genuine and asymmetric causality in cases like these, and we argue elsewhere that many case studies can be portrayed as variously vindicating individualism or structuralism depending on how they are framed (Brownstein et al. 2022, sec. 3.1).

Roe v. Wade. The march of history is likely to be more complicated than Kendi's discussions suggest.

Second, we are skeptical of some of Kendi's causal and inductive reasoning. Examining actual historical episodes can certainly be instructive, but it would be an overly optimistic induction to reason that since X led to Y in some specific time and place, X will lead to Y in other times and places as well, and will continue doing so into the future. If one wants to know whether raising the minimum wage reduces employment (or whether it changes antiracist attitudes), for example, it's not enough to simply look at the historical effects of raising the minimum wage in one or even several specific places. Rather, one would need to compare similarly matched areas that did and did not raise the minimum wage, controlling for other potentially relevant variables. Absent this kind of contrastive controlled empirical evidence, the policies-change-ideas component of the structuralist view remains merely suggestive (see Cartwright and Hardie 2012 for discussion of the many challenges here).

Third, structuralists like Kendi sometimes assume an overly simplistic view of moral psychology. Self-interest dominates human motivation, according to Kendi, and thus drives the creation of racist policies (which in turn create racist ideas). It would be unreasonable to deny that self-interest is a profound and pervasive source of human motivation. So too, however, are tribalism, conformism, outrage, empathy, moral concern, and many other psychological phenomena. We know of no compelling theory according to which self-interest, even broadly construed, is uniquely fundamental in the human mind. Indeed, most contemporary theories of human nature and moral psychology hold that what is unique about our species is our deep sociality, and our distinctive capacities for shared culture, groupishness, and cooperation (e.g. Henrich 2015; Sterelny 2021; Davis and Kelly 2021; Henrich et al. 2022; Kelly and De Block 2022).

Fourth, some of the claims Kendi makes about causal asymmetry are incompatible with each other. For example, the idea that racist ideas serve an important function, namely to suppress the "resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities" (Kendi 2016, p. 10), is offered alongside a broader claim that ideas are causally otiose. These two claims are clearly at odds. Far from portraying them as epiphenomenal, the first claim assigns racist ideas a crucial causal role in the unfolding of historical change: their prevalence *causes* people to accept racist policies. In some places Kendi says as much: "racist policies necessitate racist ideas to justify them" (Kendi 2019, p. 42). Perplexingly, he does not countenance the implication that this makes racist ideas a key part of the complex set of causal factors that create and buttress racial hierarchies. Moreover, this stance

occludes a further, perhaps more important implication that is directly relevant to issues of moral education. Given their obfuscating function, the pedagogical endeavor of providing people with the knowledge and skills to spotlight and debunk racist ideas is crucial to the overall project of overturning racist policies.

This point leads naturally to the forward-facing components of Kendi's position. While a cornerstone of his view is that the time and effort aimed at changing racist minds is better spent elsewhere, Kendi's writing is replete with claims about the mental character of antiracism and the kinds of psychological changes required to achieve it. "To be an antiracist is a radical *choice*," he writes, "requiring a radical reorientation of our *consciousness*" (Kendi 2019, p. 23, emphases added). "What if," he asks, "we measure the radicalism of speech by how radically it *transforms open-minded people*, by how the speech liberates the antiracist power *within*" (Kendi 2019, p. 212, emphases added)?⁷ In *Antiracist Baby*, Kendi instructs children to "*believe we shall overcome racism*" and to "confess when being racist. Nothing disrupts racism more than when we *confess the racist ideas* we sometimes express" (Kendi 2020, pp. 20, 17–18, emphases added). These are straightforwardly instructions about *how and what to think*. They are in obvious tension with claims about the epiphenomenal character of racist ideas and the unimportance of moral education. When Kendi says that "nothing disrupts racism more" than admitting our own internalized racist thoughts and feelings, he sounds like a classical virtue ethicist, focused on individual character and maintaining that progress lies in the cultivation of humility and honesty.

Similarly, one would have to engage in some impressive rhetorical contortions to make a plausible case that structuralist writings—most obviously Kendi's *Antiracist Baby* and *How to Raise an Antiracist*—are not really involved in *moral education*. Their aim is to teach their readers about the history, character, and normative wrongness of racism, its manifestations and functions in contemporary American society, and how we ought to overcome it. Setting aside Kendi's

⁷ One reviewer rightly points out that in this specific passage, Kendi seems to draw a distinction between "open-minded" and "closed-minded" people, and suggesting that our efforts should be directed toward motivating the former rather than trying to persuade the latter. (Our response to this suggestion would be that moral education should not "give up" on persuading putatively closed-minded racist people, but that our efforts should be tailored to our audiences: one kind of challenge is how best to motivate already open-minded, nominally antiracist people to take action, and another kind of challenge is how to engage with ostensibly closed-minded or explicitly racist people (see, e.g., Fang and White 2022).) In any case, to the extent that Kendi thinks we ought to work on motivating open minds to make structural change, then it seems he is not truly opposed to a certain kind of moral education for at least certain people, in which case we may have mischaracterized his view. However, our claim is not that Kendi is as a general matter opposed to moral education, but that his assertions about moral education and "mental change" are internally inconsistent. Many passages vociferously, unambiguously oppose it (see previous section) while other passages clearly endorse it (see especially Kendi 2022). We embrace the latter and reject the former.

deflationary rhetoric about moral education, we are fully in favor of his efforts at engaging in it! In our view we need *better*, not less, antiracist moral education.

But even here there is room for disagreement, as moral education itself can take many different forms. Kendi argues, for example, that antiracism requires endorsing radical cultural relativism. “To be antiracist is to see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals,” he writes. “When we see cultural difference, we are seeing cultural difference—nothing more, nothing less” (Kendi 2019, p. 91). Kendi doesn’t shy away from the implications of this claim. He explicitly embraces one especially radical metaphysical upshot: “To be antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as the ‘real world,’” he says, “only real worlds, multiple worldviews” (Kendi 2019, p. 171).

We have many worries about this, but will focus on the most serious one. We are not prepared to accept any form of cultural relativism on which genocidal or slave-based cultures are merely different from others, and not *worse*. We are sympathetic to Kendi’s motives in building open mindedness about cultural differences into the conditions of antiracism, especially the need to avoid blaming racial inequalities on the alleged “cultural deficiencies” of oppressed peoples, and the broader need to move beyond cultural imperialism, as Iris Marion Young would put it (Young 1990, pp. 58–61; cf. Anderson 2010, pp. 13–16). But at least in its unqualified form, this requirement should be rejected.

Our discussion of this example raises a theme that animates our assessment of recurring structuralist claims about racial injustice, including but not limited to Kendi’s. In general, we hold that there are better and worse ways to focus on people and what’s in their hearts and minds. It seems clear to us that rather than defending a position about *whether* people and their minds are the problem or the solution, a much more productive discussion will be had by focusing on *which* people, and *which* ideas contribute to the problem, and which attempts to change them are mostly likely to contribute to the solution. For example, Americans may be too concerned with arguing about who is racist and who isn’t, at the expense of doing the political work directed at winning power and enacting policies to redistribute wealth. Debating who is a racist is often a bad use of time, and an ineffective way to focus on individuals. But it does not follow from this that *any* and *all* attention aimed at individuals, or that *any* and *all* efforts aimed at changing what is in their heads, are also thereby bad uses of time.

In the next section we’ll advocate one better way to reorient moral education, to induce a different form of change in individual hearts and minds. Teaching people to appreciate the influence

of institutions, and motivating and showing them *how* to do the political work directed at winning power and enacting policies is a form of moral education with considerable promise—and one that structuralists should embrace. In this spirit, we propose a template for the kind of antiracist moral education that fits with our more ecumenical and capacious view of the sources of social change. We will highlight how it deals in “both/and” thinking about the *relationship* between policies and ideas that we maintain is crucial to the pursuit of racial justice. It is a form of moral education that we hope—schematically at least—satisfies the spirit of *Antiracist Baby*’s opening lines: “Antiracist Baby is bred, *not* born. Antiracist Baby is raised to make society transform” (Kendi 2020, p. 2).

4. Structure-Facing Virtue

We’ll start with an idea we share with structuralists: individuals too often have an insufficient understanding of, and pay too little attention to, the social structures that perpetuate racial injustice. The inference we draw from this is that antiracist moral education should be more in the business of training people to better understand social structures and show them how to change systems, norms, institutions, and their policies. Moral education so configured can help address a problem with the way people of all racial groups think, feel, and act. In what follows we articulate a family of virtues, dispositions, and traits of character that we think moral education concerned with racial justice ought to cultivate. We take no position on the relative standing of virtue ethics with respect to other normative theories such as consequentialism or deontology. We do hold, however, that cultivating these kinds of virtues will lead to better consequences (e.g., Driver 2001), viz., moral progress. We also hold that all individuals have an imperfect duty to cultivate virtues instrumental to the aim of ending racial injustice, especially insofar as all forms of racial injustice fail to treat people with respect (e.g., Glasgow 2009). That said, we express our view through the conceptual framework of virtue theory because it is naturally amenable to the idea that antiracist moral education ought to cultivate multitrack, open-ended dispositions in individuals to think, feel, and act in a variety of ways. These will vary greatly with context, evolve over time, and remain difficult to codify in a neat set of rules for action. The framework of virtue theory is well-suited to handle these challenges.⁸

Our vision of antiracist moral education reaches beyond standard structuralist ideas in that it aims to shape individuals’ knowledge and skills. But it also reaches beyond standard individualist

⁸ Thanks to anonymous reviewer for pressing us to motivate our virtue-theoretical approach.

ideas in that we take psychological changes to individuals to be a necessary component of the struggle for racial justice, but by no means a sufficient one. More importantly, we hold that antiracist moral education should not be overly focused on getting people to become more ethical in daily interactions with other individuals, e.g., teaching honesty and compassion. Such traditional virtues are *interactional*, governing the ways individuals should act in their dealings with others. They are no doubt crucial to the cause of antiracism. They can help guide individuals through fraught interracial interactions, smoothing out how co-workers treat each other in meetings, how white police officers interact with black citizens, etc.

Moral education aimed at addressing racial injustice should also teach *structure-facing* virtue.⁹ These, in contrast to their interactional counterparts, are more concerned with orienting people towards policies and structures, especially those that shape, and are shaped by, our choices (Madva 2019, 2020b).¹⁰ Moral education that instills and develops structure-facing virtue will help create the kind of people who understand unjust social systems and who are motivated to respond effectively to unacceptable policies. It will teach that appropriate and effective responses to such systems and policies are usually those aimed at uprooting or transforming them.¹¹ In this, our enthusiasm for moral education designed to promote structure-facing virtue is rooted in our both/and position on race and social change more generally. In developing this idea we understand structure-facing virtue as being underpinned by complex sets of dispositions. In the remainder of this essay, we discuss four examples of such dispositions.¹²

⁹ Similarly, Iris Marion Young (2011, p. 73; see also Aragon and Jaggard 2018) argues that “as individuals we should evaluate our actions from two different irreducible points of view: the interactional and the institutional. We should judge our own actions and those of others according to how we treat the persons we deal with directly: for example, are we honest, do we refrain from exercising dominative power when we have the means available, are we considerate? We should also ask whether and how we contribute by our actions to structural processes that produce vulnerabilities to deprivation and domination for some people who find themselves in certain positions with limited options compared to others.” See also Madva (2019) on the distinction between interactional and structure-facing *epistemic* virtues.

¹⁰ In this vein, Jennifer Saul (2018, p. 241) claims that the five “most important” traits of good “stories” (i.e., educational efforts) related to implicit bias are: “(1) The story situates implicit bias as a result of and contributor to broader structural injustice, and does not underrate the importance of combatting structural injustice. (2) The story is one on which seeking progress toward social justice is possible. (3) The story is one on which seeking progress toward social justice is desirable. (4) The story motivates action (collective or individual) toward social justice. (5) The story offers a road-map for such action.” We agree with Saul on all counts (Madva 2016b, sec. 7, a, p. 706, 2019, pp. 93–97; Brownstein et al. 2022), and in what follows we demonstrate, by appeal to concrete case studies and empirical research, how antiracist moral education can feasibly achieve aims like these.

¹¹ We say “usually” to leave room for critiques of moral sainthood (Wolf 1982). It is not a requirement on our view that one spend every waking moment of one’s life trying to change the world. As we discuss below, structure-facing virtues are dispositions, tendencies to work toward structural transformation when it is appropriate.

¹² Our focus in what follows is on ways that agents can be more attuned to social structures. A corollary question, especially pertinent for thinking through the goals of moral education, is the extent to which social structures can either

First, structure-facing virtue consists partly in dispositions to notice and act upon situational influences on our minds. From behavioral economics to situationist social psychology, the social sciences abound with examples ripe for antiracist moral educators to draw on (Grasswick 2017; Vasil [Vasilyeva] and Ayala-López 2019). For example, as of December 2021, the Covid-19 vaccination rate for Black and Hispanic Americans lagged behind the rate for White Americans by about 10% (Dottle and Tartar 2022). One likely situational cause for this is the history of mistreatment of Black Americans (in particular) by doctors and medical researchers, and the reasonable distrust in the medical establishment that it has sown (see, e.g., Taylor 2021). In this case, as in many others, the past isn't over. It isn't even past. There is extensive evidence that Black Americans continue to receive poor medical treatment relative to White Americans (Mateo and Williams 2021). This is an example of a situational influence on individual decision-making that is easily forgotten when people express (also reasonable) frustration about anti-science attitudes and low vaccination rates in the United States. These influences can be fine-grained, too. The Covid vaccination rates of Black Americans vary significantly from state to state. The greatest racial disparities are found in several Southeastern states, where, historically, slavery had the deepest roots (also see Buttrick and Mazen 2022). Moral education aimed at instilling structure-facing virtue would draw attention to these trends and teach people to ask questions about the specific historical, sociological, and geographical features of the regions that produce it.

This may seem unrealistically ambitious, but evidence suggests otherwise. Even very young children can be taught to engage in forms of “structural thinking” to explain visible disparities between social groups (e.g., Vasil [Vasilyeva] et al. 2018). Parents already serve as moral educators, but their well-meaning efforts can be redirected. Many white parents continue to socialize their children with colorblind racial ideology, believing that current events are too upsetting to discuss with their children (Abaied et al. 2020). A both/and perspective suggests an alternative way to approach these conversations. It could help children to understand events (e.g., the killing of George Floyd) that involve prejudiced individuals, but that are also representative of long-standing social patterns that create and reinforce such prejudice. In education research, this is sometimes called a

undergird or undermine virtuous individual agency. For example, an individual arguably cannot be properly attuned to social structures if they are sufficiently deeply embedded in social, technological, and media networks pervaded by misinformation about social-structural reality. Thus we are sympathetic with an “extended virtue” account that locates virtues not inside individuals but in interpersonal and individual-structural relations (Skorburg 2019; see also Washington and Kelly 2016; Madva 2019). We believe, however, that an internalist about virtue can accept much of what we say in what follows. Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging us to consider the interactions between structures and virtuous dispositions in greater depth.

“sociocultural” approach (e.g., Adams et al. 2008; Kurtis et al. 2015), one that teaches students to pay attention to and understand how social structures interact with widespread stereotypes and prejudices.

In this context of moral education, it is especially important to identify strategies that encourage the privileged to better understand the structural plight of the oppressed. Consider in this vein a preregistered study that tested the effects of a twenty-minute, online “choose-your-own-adventure” game, in which Hungarians in their mid-20s occupied the perspective of an individual in the comparatively marginalized Hungarian Roma minority (Simonovits et al. 2018). Both immediately after the game and at least one month later, participants reported much less anti-Roma prejudice, as well as less prejudice toward another social group (refugees) who were not mentioned in the game. Participants were even 10% less likely to intend to vote for Hungary’s far-right white-supremacist party. While this study did not directly test, say, the extent to which participants understood the situations of the Hungarian Roma or refugees, it is plausible that the political and debiasing effects of the intervention depend in part on the participants’ increased appreciation of the structural obstacles faced by the oppressed. Games like this represent a relatively new tool that educational institutions can use to teach students how structures shape the lives of both the privileged and the oppressed. More ambitiously, schools can promote this aim through affirmative efforts to bring members of different groups together under terms of cooperation and social equality, such that students can more directly come to know others’ situations (Anderson 2012; Galinsky et al. 2015; Madva 2017b, 2020c).¹³

Second, structure-facing virtue incorporates dispositions not only to attend to situational influences affecting behavior and thought, but to look for ways to *change* those situations. One form of moral education devoted to instilling these kinds of predilections can be thought of as “resistance training” (Madva 2020b, p. 45). Examples of this can be found in higher education. Recent work by Jennifer Morton (2019) suggests that many first-generation undergraduates face a common but difficult dilemma. On one hand, they are encouraged to commit themselves wholly to their education, which involves assimilating and complying with its attendant, often individualistic norms (such as prioritizing financial success). On the other hand are the often demanding connections they have to the social networks they come from, whose pull can be so strong that maintaining them can often require quitting school entirely.

¹³ This paragraph is a revised version of one found in Madva (2019, p.95). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging us to say more about cultivating structure-facing virtue among the privileged.

Defenders of radical pedagogy like Paulo Freire (2018) and bell hooks (1994) offer salutary advice that suggests what we recognize as a both/and strategy for handling this dilemma (see also Collins 1999, chap. 9; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Haslanger 2021; Proios 2021). They recommend that students facing this predicament adopt an actively questioning orientation towards educational norms and structures, and encourage them to challenge those that are unjust. hooks, for example, writes:

Often, African Americans are among those students I teach from poor and working-class backgrounds who are most vocal about issues of class. They express frustration, anger, and sadness about the tensions and stress they experience trying to conform to acceptable white, middle-class behaviors in university settings while retaining the ability to “deal” at home. Sharing strategies for coping from my own experience, I encourage students to reject the notion that they must choose between experiences. They must believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort. They must creatively invent ways to cross borders. They must believe in their capacity to alter the bourgeois settings they enter. All too often, students from nonmaterially privileged backgrounds assume a position of passivity—they behave as victims, as though they can only be acted upon against their will. Ultimately, they end up feeling they can only reject or accept the norms imposed upon them. This either/or often sets them up for disappointment and failure. (hooks 1994, pp. 182–3; see also, e.g., Herrmann et al. 2021)

hooks urges students to reject “either/or” framings, to see themselves as agents of change capable of pushing back against unfair constraints, and to challenge “the bourgeois settings they enter.” This exemplifies exactly the kind of message that should be central to moral education that seeks to cultivate structure-facing virtue. It recognizes the importance of structures, but denies that students’ only options are to “reject or accept the norms imposed upon them.” hooks instead touts the virtue of striving to *change* those norms (see also Brownstein 2018b).

Does this again sound unrealistically ambitious? We take inspiration from the resistance students have shown to recent book bans. When a multiracial group of students including Edha Gupta, Christina Ellis, and Olivia Pituch learned “that their teachers had been effectively banned from using hundreds of books [including Kendi’s], documentary films and articles in their classrooms,” they took action. They protested in front of their school each morning, recruited other

students to wear black T-shirts, wrote letters to the editor of local newspapers, and began reading excerpts from the banned books on Instagram. Local residents began to support the students in several ways, including by creating a free library outside their houses featuring some of the banned books (Paz and Cramer 2021; Martin et al. 2021). The student protests persisted when the local school board voted a second time in favor of the de facto book ban, leading to another school board meeting and a reversal of the ban. Like hooks and Freire urge, the students did not just accept the unfair terms of their raw deal. They changed them. They fought the law and they won, exemplifying the structure-facing virtue of resistance to injustice.

What else is found in the character of those disposed to change situations? A third disposition involves one's default orientation towards the status quo. This one centers on resisting a default tendency to assume that the way things currently are is morally acceptable (Jost 2015). Shining a light on and providing tools to overcome this *status quo bias* is a core element of resistance training as a form of antiracist moral education. Therefore, another way to instill structure-facing virtue will be by teaching people to see structural change as appropriate, desirable, and achievable (Stewart et al. 2010; Corcoran et al. 2011; Johnson and Fujita 2012; van Zomeren 2013; Saul 2018). Research provides some guidance on how to effectively do it, too. Evidence suggests that individuals are more apt to recognize injustice, and to do something about it, when they are more willing and able 1) to question their epistemic and political intuitions; 2) to practice and take pleasure in engaging difficult cognitive activity; and 3) to be relatively untroubled when they see the world differently from those around them.

To see why these three dispositions are important, note that part of what maintains the status quo is that people internalize and endorse it, adopting epistemic and political intuitions that maintain it. This is, in effect, how Kendi and other thinkers in antiracist Marxist traditions like Vanessa Wills (2021) describe the function of racist ideas. More broadly, authoritarian hierarchical societies are maintained in part by the prevalence of intuitions and ideas suggesting that the extant hierarchy is good, i.e. that those on the bottom of the hierarchies should defer to those at the top, who belong there and ostensibly "know best." As a result, individuals will often find that those around them endorse and enforce the status quo. Resisting the status quo, then, typically requires being comfortable disagreeing with many of one's peers, and being eager and able to engage in the difficult cognitive work of challenging them, and the deeply felt epistemic and political intuitions they have embraced. Getting comfortable questioning the status quo usually requires, in short, resistance to "certainty, security, and conformity" (Jost 2015, 623). "To raise an antiracist," Kendi

writes (2022, p. 96), “is to raise a critical thinker.” There is a flip side to this picture as well. Individuals are more likely to think the status quo is fair, and even protest to preserve inequalitarian institutions, if they feel a strong need to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity, prefer not to think long and hard about difficult questions, and strongly desire to share an epistemic reality with their proximate peers.¹⁴

Dispositions that lead people to accept or challenge the status quo exhibit significant variation between individuals, suggesting that they can be influenced by the right kind of moral education (Adams et al. 2008; Kurtis et al. 2015). Ultimately, structuralists like Kendi will demand to see the connection between the kinds of changes in beliefs and attitudes we are discussing and the political activity and social change that needs to take place. They will want to see resistance training promote collective action, in other words. Yet dispositions to participate in collective forms of action are themselves appropriate subjects for cultivation and thus for antiracist moral education.

Thus, a fourth feature of structure-facing virtue is just that: a disposition to engage in collective action. It is not enough to resist the status quo as an atomic individual, but the structurally virtuous must seek out and help create opportunities to coordinate with others to bring about social change. Kendi tacitly acknowledges this and warns against one way in which collective action is often derailed— individuals too easily make the mistake of taking steps to satisfy their personal feelings rather than accomplishing tangible change. On the experience of casually attending a protest, he writes:

We arrive at demonstrations excited, as if our favorite musician is playing on the speakers’ stage. We convince ourselves we are doing something to solve the racial problem when we are really doing something to satisfy our feelings. We go home fulfilled, like we dined at our favorite restaurant. And this fulfillment is fleeting, like a drug high. The problems of inequity and injustice persist. They persistently make us feel bad and guilty. We persistently do something to make ourselves feel better as we convince ourselves we are making society better, as we never make society better. (Kendi 2019, p. 210)

We see this as an example of what has been branded “political hobbyism” (Hersh 2020), the tendency to consume, discuss, and emote about politics with like-minded peers—often online—

¹⁴ The two foregoing paragraphs are revised from Madva (2019, p.95-96).

instead of doing the less glamorous work of winning power to create change. Both Kendi and Hersh contrast hobbyism (though Kendi does not use this term) with local forms of collective action, such as attending community meetings, taking over political party committees, and recruiting and volunteering on behalf of state legislative candidates.

Hobbyism is a real problem, particularly for antiracist progressives. In survey research, for example, Hersh finds that in 2018 a third of respondents reported spending at least two hours consuming news and thinking about politics. Of these, virtually none reported spending even a trivial amount of time working or volunteering for any political organization. This disparity between hobbyist activities and time spent engaging in collective action was especially pronounced amongst well-educated white liberals. Whatever the reason for it—Hersh suggests it is because well-educated white liberals are often materially comfortable with the status quo, even if they *feel* strongly about justice and politics—it is a problem that moral education aimed at developing and instilling countervailing structure-facing virtue is well positioned to address. Indeed, here we see the interdependence of two dispositions integral to the cultivation of structure-facing virtue: engaging in collective action and resisting the temptation to see the status quo as just, or at least as acceptable.¹⁵

There are many compelling models for incorporating the cultivation of the disposition to engage in collective action into university syllabi. In philosophy, for example, professors can incorporate small actions that build toward broader forms of civic engagement. In one exemplary course we know of, students are asked to pick a cause that they care about and then take one action each week, such as writing a letter to someone who can do something about that issue or accumulating a certain number of volunteer hours. (See the [Engaged Philosophy](#) website for more resources.¹⁶)

5. Conclusion

While our discussion has focused on antiracist moral education, the idea of structure-facing virtue that we have been developing is applicable to moral and political education more generally. It is relevant to a broad set of justice-related issues. Consider climate change; it is driven by our collective activity, which is shaped by factors outside individual heads like laws, economies, cultural power

¹⁵ This paragraph is a revised version of one found in Brownstein and Levy (2021, p. 542).

¹⁶ <https://www.engagedphilosophy.com/>

dynamics, history, norms, technologies, and physical infrastructure. The looming climate crisis is often diagnosed as a “structural” problem in need of a structural response. Climate structuralists, sounding very similar to antiracist structuralists like Kendi, often decry the foolishness of thinking that “individual change” is at all significant. Headlines like, “I work in the environmental movement; I don’t care if you recycle” are both common and similar in spirit to structuralist antiracist rhetoric (Heglar 2019). In both cases, the implied message is what can be done as individuals—be it recycling or having a difficult conversation with a racist uncle—is a distraction from what matters, namely changing policies and laws.

We see this growing enthusiasm for structuralism as an understandable and very much-needed reaction to the historical individualism of many Western cultures, but some calls for prioritizing structural change may lead to a potentially disastrous overcorrection. There is much to critique about simple individualistic approaches to racial justice, the climate emergency, and other social and political problems. But the best way forward is not to substitute one monolithic view for another. Rather, it is to integrate what is right in each perspective and to strive to better understand how people and policies are interdependent. Elsewhere we outline an approach to climate activism (Brownstein et al. 2022). Here our focus has been on developing a similarly interdependent approach to antiracist moral education.

Finally, we should reiterate that we are wholly behind the idea of writing antiracist baby books, antiracist young adult nonfiction, and so on. (These are just an example of the broader genre of activist-oriented baby books, from the *Feminist Baby* (Brantz 2017) series to the classic *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman 2016).) As we alluded to above, we are puzzled by the suggestion that these do not count as potentially valuable works of moral education. Perhaps it would seem so to one who is in the grip of a picture, in a Wittgensteinian sense. In this case, it is the picture of social history and moral progress as being driven by *either* individuals *or* structures, a picture which obscures the fact that it is always and everywhere both. With this in mind, we close, in the spirit of Kendi’s laudable focus on childhood moral education (despite his protests to the contrary), with a bit of our own whimsy:

Some people say, the problem’s this or it’s that,
but that either/or framing is silly old hat.
The problem’s both/and, it’s so plain to see,
but something forgotten too easily.

Policies make people, who could deny it?

But people make policies—don't believe us? Just try it!¹⁷

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