***Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (9th Edition)**

**Part V Summary: Ethics and Society**

**Jeremy Bentham, “The Principle of Utility”**

One of the fathers of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham here lays out what he calls the “principle of utility” and discusses it. Some version of the principle of utility is the foundation of every utilitarian moral theory.

Bentham first points out that pain and pleasure are the two phenomena in the world that tell us what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. The principle of utility, therefore, attempts to formulate this insight by saying that an action is to be approved of or disapproved of insofar as that action tends to augment or diminish the happiness of the affected party. Or, to put it more simply, the principle of utility can be seen as an injunction to promote happiness.

What is it to promote the happiness of an individual? According to Bentham, an action promotes the happiness of an individual if it increases the sum total of his pleasures. But how are we to determine the value of any particular episode of pleasure or pain? Bentham gives us seven criteria: intensity, duration, certainty, remoteness, fecundity, purity, and extent. Once we measure the value of each of these criteria, a simple arithmetical operation will give us the value of the episode of pleasure or pain.

**John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism”**

In this classic piece, John Stuart Mill explains and defends the theory of utilitarianism. This piece contains considerably more detail than the Bentham piece.

Mill begins with the Greatest Happiness Principle that lies at the heart of utilitarian ethical theory, according to which an action is right insofar as it tends to promote happiness and wrong insofar as it tends to produce unhappiness. The principle is simply stated, but it requires some explication. First, Mill defines “happiness” as pleasure and the absence of pain, and “unhappiness” as pain and the privation of pleasure. Second, Mill points out that some kinds of pleasure are more valuable than other kinds of pleasure.

Many have thought that the Greatest Happiness Principle is somehow undignified because it seems to encourage people to pursue even base pleasures. Although Mill is clear that even base pleasures are to be counted as a part of happiness, he is careful to draw a distinction between the base pleasures that a mere animal might enjoy, on the one hand, and the more intellectual pleasures that a human being is capable of enjoying. These intellectual pleasures, according to Mill, are more valuable than pleasures like food and drink. And the way we know that they are more valuable is simply because of the people who have had both sorts of pleasure, there is a decided preference for intellectual pleasures. As a final clarification, Mill points out that the happiness involved in the Greatest Happiness Principle is not just that of the individual who is acting, but that of everyone who might be affected by the individual’s action.

After clarifying the Greatest Happiness Principle, Mill spends a bit of time responding to objections against utilitarianism. Here are two. First, someone might object that utilitarianism is too demanding because it requires that people act for the sake of others’ happiness too often. But Mill responds by pointing out that this objection confuses the thing that makes an action right with the thing that motivates a person to act. Utilitarianism, according to Mill, does not require that people do the right thing *because* it’s the right thing. Motive is at best secondary. Someone might also object that utilitarianism is unrealistic because we never have enough time prior to making a decision to calculate the effects our action will have on the happiness of everyone concerned. But Mill thinks it is ridiculous to suppose that all of the calculation must be done in the few seconds preceding a decision. Rather, we have the whole history of the world from which to learn what the effects of our future actions will most likely be, as well as a number of subordinate principles that can help us apply the theory in the practical realm.

Mill next considers the source of the obligation to promote happiness. His simple answer is that the principle is founded in the same place as all other ethical theories are: the conscientious feelings of human beings. Finally, Mill inquires into what proof might be given of the principle. He argues we can say that happiness is desirable simply because everyone desires it and no one desires anything else.

**E. F. Carritt, “Criticisms of Utilitarianism”**

In this brief piece, Carritt considers four different criticisms of utilitarianism. Although he thinks the utilitarian has an adequate response to the first, he thinks the other three are fatal to the theory.

The first criticism is that it is impossible to quantify pleasure. If it’s impossible to quantify pleasure, then there’s no way to carry out the complicated calculations that the utilitarian claims have to be made to determine which course of action will produce the most happiness overall. But Carritt thinks that this criticism misses its mark because in most cases, one need not be able to precisely quantify pleasure to determine which course of action will produce *more* or *less* pleasure. As Carritt puts it, two different pleasures may not be measurable, but they certainly could be comparable.

The final three criticisms are supposedly fatal to utilitarianism. First, utilitarianism makes no room for justice because it is indifferent to how happiness is distributed among different people. Second, utilitarianism’s insistence that some pleasures are more valuable than others is inconsistent with the theory because the only reason one pleasure could be better than another is if there were something more intrinsically valuable about that one pleasure. And if there’s something intrinsically valuable about a type of pleasure, then pleasure itself is not the only thing that is intrinsically valuable. And third, utilitarianism cannot account for the concept of a right. For instance, if breaking a promise would not lead to bad consequences overall, there is nothing wrong with breaking the promise according to utilitarianism. And surely that is an implausible consequence of an ethical theory.

**Mozi, “Excerpts from Mozi”**

In these excerpts, Mozi argues for being impartial in one’s interactions with others and for the moderation of expenditures in the running of a state. On impartiality, Mozi holds that this is how best to promote what is beneficial to the world and to eliminate what is harmful; the evils in the world are due to partiality, treating others in a way that is different from how one treats oneself. Mozi argues that acting impartially is would improve the world and is easier done than its detractors might suggest. In the second excerpt, Mozi holds that a state would be much better off if it focused on simplifying how people live rather than focusing on expansion for the purposes of maintaining lavish lifestyles.

**Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”**

In this intriguing and thought-provoking piece, Peter Singer challenges the attitudes and actions that people living in affluent countries take toward those in the world who are suffering and dying from famine. He puts forward a simple argument that, if sound, would require a deep change in the way our society conceives of our duties to those dying from famine.

Singer begins by merely pointing out the fact that there are people starving in poorer countries. (Singer was writing in 1971, but this fact has surely not changed significantly since then.) He then points out that those living in richer countries are in a position to stop this starvation. Given these two facts, what are the moral implications of this situation?

The argument that Singer sets out has three steps. First, he asserts that suffering and death that result from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. Singer sees this step as utterly uncontroversial and doesn’t argue for it in any way. Second, he puts forward a principle according to which if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it. And third, we can infer from the previous two steps that we are morally required to try to prevent the suffering and death occurring as a result of famine all around the world.

Singer makes two important points about the principle he uses in his second step. First, the principle does not take proximity into consideration. That is, it doesn’t matter whether those who are dying from starvation are your neighbors or are halfway across the world. Surely a difference in geographical location, in today’s world of rapid transportation and communication, cannot make a moral difference. Second, the principle does not take into consideration the fact that there are many other people who are also in a position to help. So, long as those people are not in fact helping, your obligation to help is not reduced in the slightest.

If we accept Singer’s argument, what used to be called “charity” now becomes duty. It is usually regarded as a nice thing to do, although certainly not morally required, to donate money to famine relief. But Singer’s argument shows that this attitude is not justified. Giving to famine relief in some way or other becomes not just a nice thing to do—it becomes required by morality. It is clear that widespread acceptance of Singer’s argument would necessitate a radical change in the way that citizens of affluent countries conduct their affairs.

Singer goes on to explain his argument in more detail and consider various objections raised against it.

**Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals”**

This selection is from chapters 1 and 2 of Kant’s *Groundwork*. It discusses, among other things, the concept of a good will, the concept of an imperative, the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, and the different formulations of the categorical imperative.

Kant distinguishes hypothetical and categorical imperatives as follows. A hypothetical imperative is one that asserts that if one wills a particular end, then one must take the means necessary to accomplish that end. It is hypothetical in that it is always relative to a particular willed end. A categorical imperative, on the other hand, is one that asserts that a particular course of action is required, regardless of any willed end. There are (at least) three different formulations of the categorical imperative.

The first formulation is the Formula of Universal Law. According to this formulation, one ought to “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” The second formulation is the Formula of the End in Itself. According to this formulation, one ought to “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” And finally, the third formulation is the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends. According to this formulation, one ought to act in such a way that one’s action contributes to the making of laws “whereby alone a kingdom of ends is possible.” Each formulation requires detail and explanation, which Kant gives in this selection.

**Onora O’Neill, “Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems”**

In this piece, Onora O’Neill applies one of the formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative to some considerations about famine relief and compares Kantian moral theory with utilitarianism in the process.

The formulation of the categorical imperative that she focuses on is the Formula of the End in Itself, according to which one must always act so that one never treats other people as mere means to an end. As O’Neill spells it out, to treat someone as a mere means is “to involve them in a scheme of action to which they could not in principle consent.” Most forms of deception or coercion, for example, would be disallowed by this formulation of the categorical imperative. For instance, if you were to make a promise to someone that you had no intention of keeping, you would be treating this person as a mere means because you would be deceiving him about your true intentions and thus there would be no way for him to consent to the way you are using him to get what you want.

O’Neill points out that although justice only requires that we never use people as mere means, beneficence may well require more than this. In particular, beneficence may require that we also seek to foster others’ plans by taking some of their ends as our own. This becomes important later when O’Neill discusses duties of beneficence and their relation to famine relief.

Having explained the formulation of the categorical imperative she is considering, O’Neill goes on to give a list of actions having to do with famine situations that are unjust according to Kantian principles. For example, if you are a member of the famine-stricken population, you may not cheat or try to get more than your fair share. Any form of corruption that deceives or puts pressure on others is wrong. And of course, one must still try to fulfill one’s duties to other people, such as one’s dependents. For those who are not members of the famine-stricken population, there are still duties. For example, aid officials cannot use coercive power for political advantage or coerce people into accepting sterilization. And this list goes on.

O’Neill briefly considers duties of beneficence in times of famine and then closes by comparing and contrasting Kantian moral theory with utilitarianism. She argues that the fact that Kantian moral theory does not directly take the consequences of an action into consideration is not a reason to think that the theory is mistaken.

**Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics”**

The contemporary moral theory that goes by the name of “virtue ethics” is thought to derive from Aristotle’s book, *Nicomachean Ethics*. This selection is an excerpt from that work.

Among the topics discussed in this selection are the nature of virtue and happiness, the proper function of human beings, the notion of a character trait, habitual activity, and the value of contemplation.

**Rosalind Hursthouse, “Right Action”**

In “Right Action,” an excerpt from her monograph *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse offers a preliminary characterization of the aims and scope of virtue ethics. Specifically, she is interested in arguing that with respect to a range of important moral issues, virtue ethics is no worse off than the standard deontological and consequentialist positions. For example, one typical objection to virtue ethics is that it gives no answer to the question, “What is the right thing to do?” But Hursthouse argues that in fact, virtue ethics can answer this question. The right thing to do, she argues, depends on what a perfectly virtuous person would do in those circumstances. In this view, the standards of right action are determined by our conception of a perfectly virtuous agent. And moreover, this conception of a perfectly virtuous agent should be action guiding.

**John Rawls, “A Theory of Justice”**

In this selection, John Rawls lays out some of the main ideas behind his conception of justice. Central to the account are the notions of the basic structure of society, justice as fairness, the veil of ignorance, and reflective equilibrium.

Principles of social justice, according to Rawls, “provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.” But what are the principles of social justice? Before answering this question, Rawls explains the process of answering it. First, we must decide what sort of thing we are assessing as just or unjust. Rawls’s answer to this question is that we are discussing the basic structure of society, which is just the major social, political, and economic institutions of society. A theory of justice should provide a way for assessing whether these institutions are just.

Second, Rawls describes how the principles of justice are to be selected. This is where the idea of justice as fairness comes in. The principles of justice, according to Rawls, “are those that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association.” Once we figure out which principles fit this mold, we will have our principles of justice. However, there are at least two more wrinkles.

To further specify how the principles of justice are to be selected, Rawls invokes his idea of the “veil of ignorance.” This is the idea that the free and rational persons who are concerned to further their own interests also should not know their status in society or their own psychological propensities. The free and rational persons should, in other words, be behind a veil of ignorance about important matters that may bias the principles of justice they deem worthy of acceptance. And finally, in selecting and applying principles of justice, we should employ the method of reflective equilibrium, which is the method of attempting to strike a balance between our theoretical and our pretheoretical convictions.

With this framework in place, Rawls sets out two principles of justice that he thinks would be accepted by free and rational persons in an initial position of equality. These principles are as follows:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.

Given these two principles, Rawls points out that *injustice* may be simply defined as inequalities that are not to the benefit of all. The rest of the selection contains further discussion of these two principles.

**Robert Nozick, “Justice and Entitlement”**

In this selection, Nozick presents a theory of distributive justice that he calls the “entitlement theory.” More specifically, his topic in this selection is that of justice in holdings.

There are three topics in the category of justice in holdings. First, there is the topic of original acquisition of holdings. Second is the topic of the transfer of holdings, and third, that of rectification of injustice in holdings. Each topic will yield its own principle of justice. Nozick points out that if the world were wholly just, we could give the following inductive definition of the subject of justice in holdings:

1. A person who acquires a holding in accordance with the principle of justice in acquisition is entitled to that holding.

2. A person who acquires a holding in accordance with the principle of justice in transfer, from someone else entitled to the holding, is entitled to the holding.

3. No one is entitled to a holding except by (repeated) applications of items 1 and 2.

Given this definition, a particular distribution would be just, as long as everyone is entitled to their holdings. But this definition neglects to take into consideration the fact that there is much injustice in the world, and this is why Nozick includes the topic of the rectification of injustice.

Having sketched his theory of distributive justice, Nozick goes on to highlight some important features of it that also serve to show where other theories go wrong. First, the entitlement theory is an *historical* theory rather than an end-result theory. That is to say, the entitlement theory looks not only at the current distribution of goods to decide whether it is just but also looks at the processes by which that distribution came about. According to Nozick, justice in holdings is a deeply historical phenomenon—it matters how the distribution came about.

The entitlement theory is also *unpatterned*. That is, the theory does not specify that a distribution of holdings should vary along some natural dimension. The theory does not say that each person should have no more nor less than they deserve according to their moral merit, for example. Nozick uses his famous Wilt Chamberlain example to argue that any patterned principle of justice cannot be “continuously realized without continuous interference with people’s lives.” Because people can freely choose to spend their money in ways that they want, any pattern will be continuously upset by people’s free choices.

Finally, Nozick adds the “Lockean proviso” to his theory. This proviso derives from Locke’s theory of acquisition and states that in acquiring new holdings, there must be “enough and as good left in common for others.” In other words, with respect to goods that are necessary for human life, no one person can have a monopoly, even if that person acquired such a monopoly by otherwise just means.

**John Stuart Mill, “The Subjection of Women”**

Mill’s avowed aim in this essay is to argue that the legal subordination of women is wrong and ought to be replaced with a system of perfect equality. Well before women earned the right to vote in the United States and Britain, Mill was arguing the case of women’s rights.

Mill first argues that one of the things we have learned from past generations is that it is no good to make laws for or against issues that would resolve themselves in the natural course of things anyway. For instance, he points out that it is absurd to make it a law that only strong people can be blacksmiths. After all, the fact that blacksmiths by their very nature must be strong is sufficient to rule out there being any weak blacksmiths. Similarly, Mill argues that if there is any occupation that only a man can do, then there is no need for a law excluding women from the occupation. Of course, he makes his point clear: The occupations that women are excluded from are not in fact occupations that can only be done by men.

It will not do, according to Mill, to claim that we have learned from experience that the system of subordinating women is the right way to go. Mill points out that there is no way that we can judge the merits of two systems when we have never experienced one of those systems we are meant to judge. Similarly, it will not do to claim that it is the nature of men and women that makes the system appropriate. For, according to Mill, “the nature of women,” as we know it, is an artificial thing, shaped and molded by the existing system of subordination. Moreover, given our current state of knowledge, Mill argues that no one is justified in having any positive opinion about the nature of men and women in any case.

**Annette C Baier, “The Need for More Than Justice”**

In “The Need for More Than Justice,” Anette Baier offers a critique of contemporary social and moral theories that make justice their first principle. She begins by considering the work of Carol Gilligan, which suggests that men and women morally mature in different ways. Men tend to work within moral frameworks that emphasize mutual respect, whereas women tend to emphasize mutual care. For Baier, moral theory can benefit by taking seriously an ethics of care.

Baier does not intend to do away with justice entirely; however, she holds that care and justice need to be brought into harmony. She considers the general Kantian view of society and points to four differences between this view and one that emphasizes an ethics of care. Kantian views tend to make their “first virtue justice, construed as respect for equal rights to formal goods.” The problem, however, is that such formal goods don’t “do much to ensure that the people who have and mutually respect such rights will have any other relationships to one another than the minimal relationship needed to keep such a ‘civil society’ going.”

Kantian views fail in this way for four reasons. First, they emphasize individualism as a kind of independence, rather than understanding individualism as “defined by responses to dependency and to patterns of interconnection.” Second, they put their emphasis on relationships between equals, and so mask “the question of what our moral relationships to those who are our superiors or our inferiors in power.” Third, Kantian views emphasize freedom of choice, and so fail to appreciate the fact that many of our moral relationships are unchosen. And finally, Kantian views emphasize the authority of intellect over emotions. That is, they work on the assumption “that we need not worry what passions persons have, as long as their rational wills can control them.” Such an assumption, though, isn’t useful when we think about the kind of person we want in any close relationship of mutual interdependence. As Baier notes, parents “need to love their children, not just to control their irritation.”

For Baier, moral theory can progress not if it stops thinking about justice. Rather, she holds that we need to think about traditional concepts like justice, autonomy, equality, and individualism within a framework of care.

**Elizabeth Anderson, “What’s Wrong with Inequality?”**

Elizabeth Anderson starts this short piece by noting that it is not social hierarchies themselves that egalitarianism objects to; it is rather *unjust* social hierarchies that egalitarianism finds problematic. Anderson then focuses on three types of unjust social hierarchies. The first she calls inequalities of standing, where one social group’s interests are weighted more heavily than another group’s; the second she calls inequalities of power, where some groups exercise arbitrary and unaccountable power over subordinates; and the third she calls inequalities of esteem, where some groups stigmatize or demean other groups and monopolize honorable status for themselves.

Anderson then considers ways to think about inequalities of material goods. According to Anderson, the key for equality here is that everyone have a fair opportunity to succeed. Providing such a range of opportunities to everyone requires, among other things, taking anti-discrimination laws seriously, providing fair educational opportunities, health and unemployment insurance, and combating extreme wealth inequality.

The piece concludes with Anderson appealing to the Rawlsian idea that the only just inequalities are those that promote everyone’s interest, and how this should inform our thinking about inequalities between identity groups. She claims that no one should be entitled or denied an authoritative office simply based on who they are, and that this is unjust precisely because this doesn’t promote everyone’s interest.

**Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”**

In “A Defense of Abortion,” Judith Jarvis Thomson develops a novel defense of abortion. She grants her opponents that fetuses are human beings, and she considers the following argument against abortion:

“Every person has a right to life. So, the fetus has a right to life. No doubt the mother has a right to decide what shall happen in and with her body; everyone would grant that. But surely a person’s right to life is stronger and more stringent than the mother’s right to decide what happens in and with her body, and so outweighs it. So, the fetus may not be killed; an abortion may not be performed.”

Against this argument, Thomson adduces her famous violinist case. In this case, you wake up and find yourself attached to a famous violinist, who is threatened by a fatal kidney ailment and requires the use of your kidneys to live. Detaching from this violinist will result in his death, and he requires to be attached for a prolonged period of time, perhaps nine months or nine years. It seems permissible, in this case, to detach from the violinist. And this suggests something is wrong with the foregoing argument against abortion. Particularly, it raises questions about what the right to life is and what that right entails about the duties of others.

Thomson argues that a right to life is the right not to be killed unjustly. She suggests that in many cases, abortion doesn’t amount to unjust killing. Particularly, she suggests that the fetus may have a right to life, but this doesn’t entail that the fetus has a right to the mother’s body. This point underlines the fact that anti-abortionists, according to Thomson, often fail to treat the mother’s right to decide what happens in and with her body seriously, despite accepting that the mother has this right. Ultimately, then, Thomson concludes that abortion is at least permissible in some (or most) cases. She leaves it an open question exactly what cases—if any— are cases in which abortion is impermissible.

Finally, Thomson distinguishes between the Good Samaritan and the Minimally Decent Samaritan. The former goes above and beyond what is required of them, while the latter fails to meet what is minimally expected of them. She notes that nowhere in the world is the minimum requirement that someone be willing to give up nine months of their life to save another person. Doing so would be supererogatory, and it seems that requiring women to be Good Samaritans to unborn persons inside of them is reveals a gross injustice in anti-abortion laws.

**Debra Satz, “Markets in Women’s Reproductive Labor”**

In this article, Satz considers a thesis she calls “the asymmetry thesis.” According to the asymmetry thesis, markets in women’s reproductive labor are more problematic than other currently accepted labor markets. Satz criticizes various ways of defending the asymmetry thesis and then offers a new and more promising way to uphold it.

The first way of defending the asymmetry thesis she considers is by maintaining that women’s reproductive labor is an intrinsically different sort of labor—that it is essentially not a commodity. Proponents of this defense may say such things as that you can’t sell what is part of your identity, or you can’t sell something you genetically contributed to. In response, Satz argues that none of these claims supports the contention that women’s reproductive labor is essentially something not to be bought and sold.

The second line of defense is to say that the bond between mother and child is not the same as the bond between worker and product. But Satz points out that not all women bond with their children. Indeed, she adds, some abort them. Moreover, it is at least prima facie problematic to hold that contract pregnancy is condemnable, but abortion is not. People in this position, Satz says, must say that it is okay to abort a child but not to sell it.

Another line of defense argues that the commodification of reproduction entails the commodification of children. But Satz brings up the practice of adoption and the various regulations we have surrounding it. Why couldn’t we similarly regulate contract pregnancy?

Finally, Satz offers her own defense of the asymmetry thesis. She thinks that the most plausible line of defense is to appeal to considerations of gender equality. Women’s reproductive labor, according to Satz, reinforces gender stereotypes that have been used to justify unequal treatment. Additionally, it gives others access to and control over women’s bodies and sexuality, and it raises the danger that “motherhood” will be defined merely in terms of genetics. For these reasons, Satz finds the asymmetry thesis extremely plausible.

**Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Racisms”**

The aim of Appiah’s essay is to examine some of the presuppositions about the way that we think about race and racism. He distinguishes different varieties of racism, discusses how they interact with one another, and points out some characteristics of racism in general.

The first thesis Appiah discusses is racialism, which is the view that there are heritable characteristics possessed by members of our species that allow us to divide them into a small set of races. Appiah thinks that racialism is false, but he doesn’t argue for that thesis in this essay. According to Appiah, racialism underlies two prominent strands of racism: extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic racism is the view that there are moral distinctions between members of different races because being a certain race entails possessing certain morally relevant qualities. Intrinsic racism, on the other hand, maintains that there are moral distinctions between members of different races because each race has a different moral status independent of the moral characteristics each member of a particular race possesses. Whereas extrinsic racists argue that members of other races are inferior because they have morally inferior characteristics, intrinsic racists argue that members of other races are inferior simply because they are members of their particular race.

After explaining these different sorts of racism, Appiah goes on to discuss how racism can be viewed as a sort of cognitive incapacity. Many racists are extremely rational people when it comes to other areas of inquiry, but for some reason they resist accepting the evidence they possess that tells against their racist views. Racism, then, is a sort of irrationality.

**Linda Martin Alcoff, “Racism and Visible Race”**

In “Racism and Visible Race,” Linda Martin Alcoff argues that racism is not fundamentally a matter of our visible practices of racialization. That is, she argues that eliminating these practices is neither sufficient nor necessary for eliminating racism.

Particularly, Alcoff is addressing the notion that we should aspire for a kind of “racial color blindness.” This notion, though, according to Alcoff, is actually an effect of racism. She follows Bernita Berry in characterizing the attitude as one that “reduces socially significant human differences to invisibleness and meaningless hype.” Alcoff argues that race needs to be seen “in order to see racism and the ways in which race has distorted human identity,” and perhaps also in order to “acknowledge the positive sense of racial identity that has been carved from histories of oppression.”

Alcoff next considers possible explanations for why we have visible practices of racialization in the first place, and she considers the possibility of reducing them or changing them. One explanation for our practices takes a naturalist approach. Alcoff ultimately rejects this explanation. According to this naturalist account, classifying things is natural to human cognition, because it helps us sort information more efficiently. Naturally, then, we classify other human beings by their visible characteristics and associate certain traits with these groupings.

Alcoff argues, however, that “othering those who are different in skin tone is historically and culturally particular rather than universal.” Moreover, she points to the research of Lawrence Hirschfeld, who provides a framework that can provide a more nuanced explanation for our practices of racialization based on sight. Hirschfeld proffers two different cognitive competences—a domain-specific competence and a perceptual competence. These can work in tandem or sequentially, and thus how we perceive things can be partly directed by our domain-specific competences. This contrasts with the naturalist’s linear progression from perception to domain-specific competence. In this way, seeing race is partly explained by cognitive effects of our cultural context.

Alcoff thus concludes: “ . . .if our visual faculty did not by itself lead us to this depravity, then eliminating its role in cognition cannot be either necessary or sufficient if we wish to unlearn racism. Rather, we need new domain-specific competences within which to practice our sight.”