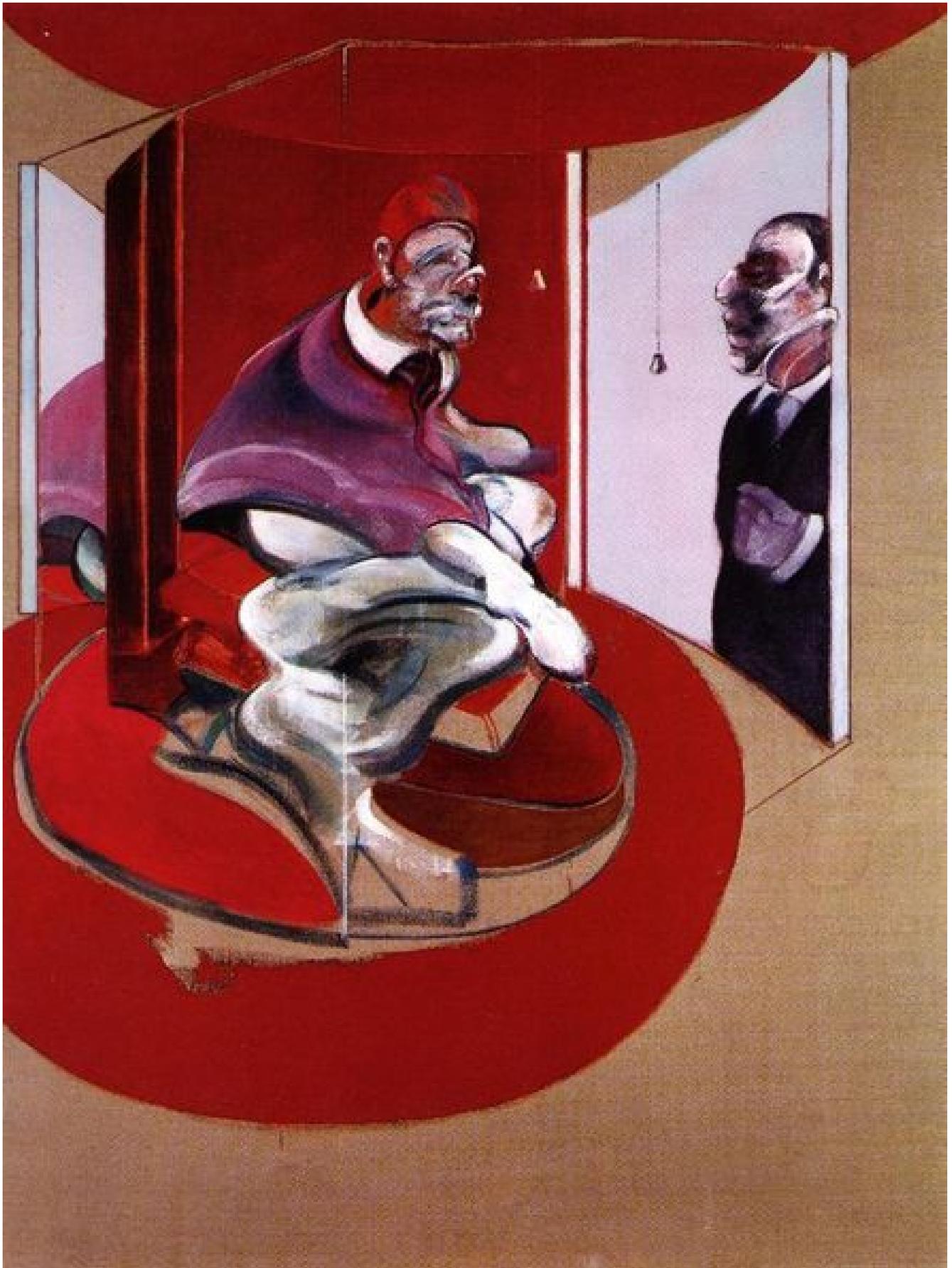


Racism as Absence

by [Howard S. Schwartz](#) (October 2020)



Study of Red Pope, Francis Bacon, 1962.

Guy comes up to you on the street and says: "I know who you are. You may look like a human, but I know that's a disguise. You have taken over the body of a human, but you are really a spy from Alpha Centauri who has come to Earth to spy on us in preparation for an invasion. You may have everybody else fooled, but you can't fool me."

"That's crazy," you say. "I'm not a spy from Alpha Centauri. I'm just an ordinary human."

"Prove it," he says.

But, of course, you can't prove it. All you could do is point to your human body, but he's got that covered. He has acknowledged that you have a human body; his claim is just that it isn't really your body, you just inhabit it. You could provide him with a full-body MRI scan and it wouldn't matter.

What can you do that will convince him?

Now let's play this game over in another, more familiar, register.

Guy comes up to you on the street and says you are a racist.

"That's crazy," you say. "I'm not a racist. I'm colorblind. I treat everybody equally. Some of my best friends are black."

He says, "See how racist you are? Those are all things that racists say! You are a racist."

What can you do that will convince him?"

The point here is one with which many of us are familiar. It's unlikely anyone has accused us of being spies from Alpha Centauri, but many of us have been accused, by people who don't know us at all, of being racist, or sexist, or whatever, and there are no grounds that we can assert that

will convince the accuser otherwise. What does one do?

I know what many people want to do. They want to lay out the contents of their minds on a table and point to each piece saying, in turn, "this is not racist," "that is not racist," and so on, until the end, knowing, all the while, that it will have no effect. And this is so, even while it is acknowledged that conscious racism is pretty much a thing of the past; so much so that its place has had to be taken by "implicit" or "systemic" racism, even though nobody making this accusation can say what they are talking about. So what is one to do?

I would like to offer a suspicion of hope here with the idea that we are looking at the charge of "racism" in the wrong way. Our tendency is to think that it refers to something inside of us. That makes it a problem because there is no way of laying out the contents of our minds and getting our accuser to acknowledge that none of them are racist. The frustration that goes along with that would make anyone crazy.

But let's turn this problem upside down. Let's suppose that the term "racist," as it is used these days, refers not to something that is inside of us, but to something that is *not* inside of us? Namely, suppose it refers, not to a feeling, but to a *lack of* feeling, specifically to a lack of love, or generally a lack of affirmation in a way that the accuser demands affirmation.

The central concept I want to use for explanation is what I call the "pristine self." The pristine self is an image of ourselves as touched upon by nothing but love. It is a reprise of the earliest stage of psychological life, which Freud called "primary narcissism."

According to psychoanalytic theory, we begin our lives in a state of deepest attachment to mother, who loves us, and is the world to us. The result is that we feel ourselves to be

the center of a loving world.

Now, of course, in ordinary development, primary narcissism is outgrown and people come to recognize that there is a world outside themselves that does not love them and that is, actually, quite indifferent.

However, for reasons I cannot go into at this time, here in what Christopher Lasch called the "culture of narcissism" (1991) this primary narcissism has come to establish people's concept of themselves. This is what I call the "pristine self." (Schwartz, 2016)

When I say that this constitutes people's concept of themselves, I do not mean that people experience the world as revolving around them with love, but rather that they think it *should*, and that, when it does not, they feel, to use the common term, "marginalized." Their response is resentment, which comes to structure their lives.

All well and good, you say, but where does "racism" come in? The answer is that racism is the name given to the reason that some racial minorities give, or which is given on their behalf, as an explanation for the lack of the love and importance to which they feel entitled. And since the world really is indifferent to them, and indeed, sometimes even dislikes them, they see racism all around them. Of course, the same reasoning applies, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of sexual minorities, religious minorities, or whatever.

The only people who are not allowed to perform this trick are the supposed dominant group: the whites, and especially the heterosexual, cis-gendered males. The reason is that they are supposed to already be in possession of the love. They gained it through their power; in effect, they stole it from those who have not had it, and who otherwise would have it still. The whites did not earn it, but hold it illegitimately. This is called "white privilege," and their

assertions that they did not steal the love, but in some way their group collectively earned it, is called “white supremacy.”

Some examples may be useful here. First is one that I ran across in a [posting](#) by the great ironist Steve Sailer, In this case, a bi-racial writer and producer named Rebecca Carroll felt oppressed by the fact that her employer, Charley Rose, had not harassed her, even though he had harassed white women.

And while many of us on staff were subject to Charlie’s unsolicited shoulder massages and physical intimidation, as he towered above us at a height over six feet tall, the women Charlie preferred and preyed upon—at least that I witnessed—were white. It was an environment that all but erased me, while simultaneously exploiting me as a black woman . . .

What caught Sailer’s attention was the contrast between her account, in the [article](#) she wrote for *Esquire* magazine, and a picture of herself that she had included. It reveals a woman Charley Rose might well have found unappealing; I know I certainly did.

Now, there would surely have to be a subjective element in whom one finds sexually attractive, but attraction is no less real for that, and it suggests a rather different, and non-racial, explanation for the fact that Rose, who claimed that he thought his sexual attentions involved “pursuing shared feelings,” did not make any moves in her direction.

As it turned out his crime was systemic:

To be clear, I’m not suggesting it would have been preferable for Charlie to have preyed upon me, too—but rather, his sexualization of white women was a manifestation of gendered power dynamics in the same way that his not sexualizing me was an expression of

racialized power dynamics.

Still, take away the opaque verbiage and I think it is clear enough that her grievance was that he did not find her sexually attractive. Going back to the question of what racism means for her, it appears that it does not correspond, in this case, to anything that is in Charlie Rose's mind, or in the white male mind generally, but that it refers to something, namely sexual attraction to her, that is not there. The implicit claim is that, in the absence of racism, others would see her as she would like to be seen, as they see white women.

This interpretation is borne out by other aspects of her article, where again racism refers to positive attitudes toward her that are not present. One example will be sufficient to make the point:

His language around race felt consistently coded. Charlie demanded I book the black guests he wanted but previously had been unable to get—black guests of a perceived level of respectability and intelligence (Sidney Poitier)—while dismissing the black guests I pitched, (Vivica Fox, for example). He accused me of pushing my own agenda several times, memorably when I pitched a panel on hiphop. (I did not hear my white colleagues receive criticism that they were pushing any sort of agenda when they pitched potential guests and segments.)

I had never heard of Vivica Fox, so I Googled her and found her to be a black actress, with a side business of making wigs and “weaves.” She had a considerable presence on the internet. The available material consisted entirely of celebrity chatter: how did she feel about reprising an old role, how did she feel about splitting up or getting back together again with a rapper named “50 Cent,” and so on. I read what I could find of interviews with her and found that everything she said was about herself; she displayed no detectable interest in anything else, nor any capacity to

comment intelligently.

In other words, her potential for the sort of intellectual conversation that marked Charlie Rose's show was negligible. Again, that provided a perfectly good reason why her pitches didn't get anyplace. She really didn't understand what the program was about. In the place of understanding, her interpretation saw the cause as racism. In her mind, her rejection had nothing to do with the content of her proposals; she believed that, if she had been white, they would have been accepted as having the value she placed on them.

Let's take another example, this one more familiar. Many will know about the Halloween events that took place in 2015 at Yale University, in which many students were incensed that an instructor in child development named Erica Christakis took issue with an email from an administrative group calling on students to avoid being offensive in their choice of Halloween costumes. The key event was a confrontation between a group of students and Nicholas Christakis, Erica's husband, professor of sociology, and master of Silliman College. [Videos](#) are available from FIRE, On the last and most famous of them, an enraged student who gained the name of Shrieking Girl abused Professor Christakis in a way one rarely hears anyone talking to anyone else, let alone a student addressing a professor. She cursed him and said he should be fired for offering the view that his job is to foster the university as an intellectual community, whereas she told him his job is to make it a home. This sits nicely enough with our analysis in the sense that a home, as she seemed to have in mind, is a place where we are surrounded by love. At the same time, her evident hatred for him and his contrary view is a clear sign that his sin has something to do with racism.

For our purposes, though, an equally interesting exchange took place earlier in the confrontation, when a student was upset that Christakis did not know her name. We come into this conversation after it has begun. The

transcription is mine:

Student A: (inaudible) I live here. I eat in the dining halls for all three meals, and you should know my name. My name is Michaela, but people have called me other names. People have called me Jeralynn, people have called me Malika, people have called me Nina

Christakis: Now, I've learned Jeralynn, and I've learned Malika, and I've learned . . .

Crowd: Applause.

Christakis: (Raises his arms to accept applause) Thank you. (inaudible) 500 names. I have 500 names to learn, (inaudible) I have 500 names to learn. And if you'd like to see the personal effects my difficulty in learning names, you can.

Student A: I do see it. Okay. But I have a point, because . . .

NC: But Michaela, you have to understand it has nothing to do with your race, my difficulty learning names, (inaudible)

Student A: Well, but that's how it seems, because I have been here . . .

The key exchange here is "that's how it seems" in response to "it has nothing to do with your race." What can "it seems" possibly mean? Trying to make sense of how her mind is working, I cannot think of anything other than that his failure to remember her name is understood in contrast to an assumption that, if she had been white, notwithstanding the fact that he had 500 other students in a similarly relationship to him, he would have remembered it. Racism, here again.

Finally, I would like to point out the help this

interpretation offers in gaining an understanding of a current term that might otherwise prove baffling. It is the idea of "systemic racism." Systemic racism is one of those terms, increasingly common in our time, whose meaning defies definition. Compare, for example, "male" and "female."

In the present case, the term "racism" gives us the sense that we know what is being talked about, even though we don't. It is our failure to be able to define the term, which would be necessary in order to identify its occurrences, that gives rise to the feeling that there needs to be something more than this conceptual confusion.

The idea of systemic racism arose to fill that vacuum. It refers to the capacity to blame racial differences on racism without being able to specify the cause in specific circumstances. The cause is said to be "systemic," which is taken to mean beyond specific definition, without being any the less real. How can we understand that black people are more likely to be incarcerated without the unacceptable stipulation that they commit more crime? Ordinarily, we suppose that there is racism somewhere along the way that leads to this result. But where and how does this racism operate? Social scientists have been looking for signs of this malign condition for decades and to no effect. How can we continue to maintain that racism is the cause?

The idea that racism is a something should lead to our capacity to locate it. The idea that it is a something that is demanded, on the basis of race, but which is not there, solves our problem for us. It is in the "system," which simply means that it is everywhere.

And that is entirely consistent with the idea that it is nowhere.

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Howard S. Schwartz is an emeritus professor of organizational behavior at Oakland University. He writes about the psychodynamics underlying political correctness and its capacity for destroying organizations. He currently lives in New York City. His books are available through [Amazon](#). Recent published work can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

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