

**A Moral Appraisal
of
An Individual Act
Of Racial Discrimination**

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PREFACE

Perhaps the greatest social problem confronting America today is the problem of making Democracy work at home. Until this problem is solved America's bid for moral leadership throughout the world is tremendously handicapped, if not rendered hopeless.

The most glaring breakdown in the working of Democracy at home is found in the unjust and uncharitable discrimination practiced against the Negro American. Until this defect in the operation of our democratic machinery is remedied it is idle to speak of selling Democracy abroad. We must first practice ourselves what we preach to others.

Motives are necessary in any human endeavor. The most powerful of all motives, the one that should underlie all other motives, whether they be political, economic or otherwise, should be the moral motive. It is also the most necessary and important. Other motives, unless they rest on the solid foundation of morality, are reduced to mere opportunism and expediency.

It is to supply the necessary moral motive for the solution of America's race problem that the following moral appraisal of an individual act of racial discrimination has been prepared. It deals with racial discrimination in a restaurant. It is to be noted that what is proved to be immoral, and sinful because it is immoral, is the act of racial discrimination. This act is immoral wherever practiced. The place is merely incidental. Hence the case before us applies with equal force to racial discrimination practiced in a church, hotel, school, employment policy, etc. The moral principles used in solving the particular case presented are universal in their application. Hence, like a spot-light, they may be used to pick out the immorality in other types and cases of discrimination than the one cited below.

TYPICAL CASE

OF

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

John White operates a public restaurant to support his family. He recognizes all human beings as essentially equal but one day refuses service to Jim Black, a Negro, on the grounds that to serve Black would harm his business, which caters to white trade only. Is John White's act of discrimination moral or immoral?

SOLUTION: An act is immoral if one (or more) of the constituent elements of the act is immoral, namely: 1) The END OF AGENT (purpose); 2) The END OF OBJECT (means); 3) The CIRCUMSTANCES. But, in the case stated, elements 2 and 3 are immoral. Hence the act is immoral on these two points, or doubly immoral.

- PROOF:** 1) The END OF AGENT is good; John White intends to support his family.
- 2) The END OF OBJECT is immoral because:
- a) John White is striking a blow on the wedge that tends to split the natural unity of the human race. Hence his act *violates* the NATURAL LAW.
 - b) His act *violates* JUSTICE because:
 - i) He denies Jim Black the treatment due him as a HUMAN BEING.
 - ii) He does not treat Jim Black on an equal footing with other members of the public.
 - iii) He *denies* Jim Black the dignity, respect and courtesy *due* him as a HUMAN PERSON.
 - c) His act *violates* CHARITY because it humiliates, hurts and frustrates Jim Black; it objectively degrades him.
- 3) The CIRCUMSTANCES greatly aggravate the objective immorality of the act because individual acts of discrimination of the kind under question, even when done without malice or bitterness, but for business reasons only, support and perpetuate the GROSSLY IMMORAL SOCIAL PATTERN known as "Jim Crow" or the "Color Line" in America with all its horribly evil consequences. (cf. A Moral Appraisal of the Color Line; *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, August, 1948.)

SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

1. John White has the obligation, and consequently the right, to support his family and operating the restaurant is the means chosen by him for this purpose. Hence there is here a conflict of two rights.

Reply: There is no conflict of rights here. John White can support his family and also serve Negroes.

2. If John White serves Negroes his business will fall off and his family suffer. Under these conditions it is asking too much of him.

Reply: How does John White know his business will fall off since presumably he has never tried serving Negroes? Could it be that his fears are exaggerated? In any case, which good comes first; the dubious private good of his family or the certain common good of society? The difficulty of the circumstances under which John White might serve Negroes certainly would mitigate his guilt in refusing to serve them but certainly could not excuse it completely except under very extreme circumstances.

3. John White is not responsible for the social pattern in which he lives and has a right to accommodate himself to it.

Reply: Granted that he is not responsible for the immoral social pattern in which he lives; still he has no more right to accommodate himself to it than he would have a right to accommodate himself to the immoral social pattern wherein cheating, stealing and lying are the fashion.

(Please make use of this in every way possible)