

# Philosophical Approach to Prove Affirmative Action's Morality

**Boyou Chen\***

University of Wisconsin Madison, Madison, 35756, United States of America

*\*Corresponding author: Boyou Chen*

**Copyright:** 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, and explicitly prohibiting its use for commercial purposes.

**Abstract:** In this paper, I will discuss whether Affirmative Action is moral or not. There are three main parts of this paper. The first one introduces the definition and motivation of Affirmative Action. The second is about certain perspectives that Affirmative Action is immoral. For the third part, I will criticize those perspectives and defend the argument that Affirmative Action is moral with reasons. At last, I would prefer to briefly mention the relation between Affirmative Action's motivation and outcome and develop a new question for future thinking.

**Keywords:** Philosophy; Affirmative Action; Ethical Theory; Morality

**Published:** Apr 22, 2025

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v2i2.223>

## 1.Introduction

"Affirmative action" means positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and minorities in areas of employment, education, and culture from which they have been historically excluded[1]. In history, minor racial groups were unwillingly exploited by the dominant white people. Nevertheless, in essence, they economically contributed to society. For instance, Black people sold their labor to plantation owners almost without wage or to factory owners cheaply. Immorally speaking, this historical fact stimulated American society's primitive accumulation of capital. With the development of time, this contribution does not bring Black people a fair reward. As a result, Affirmative action tries to solve that issue by providing more opportunities to minor groups (not only Black people) and females.

## 2.Philosophical Arguments of Affirmative Action

### 2.1 Argument of Affirmative Action's immorality

For some philosophers, Affirmative action is immoral, because it's reverse discrimination. Affirmative action seems to sacrifice many white people's benefit whose socioeconomic status is similar to that of minority groups. Kenneth Simon wrote: With respect to individual fairness, not every black is an indirect victim of discrimination and not every white is an indirect beneficiary<sup>[2]</sup>. This means we shouldn't attribute all of Black people's current situation to discrimination. Although Black people suffered a lot from slavery, racial segregation, and discrimination, most white people did not benefit from that. In other words, ordinary white people except the dominant class suffered in history as well. "Just as the previous discrimination did, this reverse discrimination violates the public equality which defines citizenship."<sup>[3]</sup> By decomposing their articles, I summarize them through a premise-conclusion argument (Argument 1):

1.Any discrimination is immoral.

2. Affirmative action is discrimination against white people.

3. Therefore, Affirmative action is immoral.

### 2.1.1. Argument 1's Truth Value

This argument is valid, so I only need to provide more evidence to prove its soundness according to these philosophers' logic. For Premise 1, discrimination is definitely immoral, because it's unfair and unjust to treat a person negatively based on his or her racial and gender background or even deny this person's identity. As a result, Premise 1 is true. For Premise 2, Lisa Newton pointed out that "they commit the same injustice perpetrated by Jim Crow discrimination."<sup>[4]</sup> For instance, in college admission, many universities would prefer to consider their racial diversity as an important element, so they intentionally send offers to students with minor racial backgrounds, even if their grades are lower than average. This is understood as Affirmative action that seeks to eradicate inequality based on racial identity. In this sense, Affirmative action sends a message to people that race doesn't matter, since Blacks, Hispanics, and other minor groups have equal opportunities as white people have. However, William Bennett and Terry Eastland indicated that it's unlogic, because "To count by race, to use the means of numerical equality to achieve the end of moral equality, is counterproductive, for to count by race is to deny the end by virtue of the means. The means of race counting will not, cannot, issue in an end where race does not matter."<sup>[5]</sup> Their idea is that if we want to achieve the moral goal in society that race doesn't matter anymore through Affirmative action, the criteria should simply relate to applicants' ability instead of concern with minor racial background. This is because, for instance, if universities still consider race as a factor in student admissions, the statement that race doesn't matter anymore is obviously false. By developing this criticism that Affirmative action causes that race still matters, it's easy to find an inequality that violates white people's rights. Affirmative action confounded desert by severing reward from a "person's character, talents, choices and abilities"<sup>[6]</sup> and by "subordinating merit, conduct, and character to race."<sup>[7]</sup> From this perspective, those white people capable of college admissions or job positions fail to achieve what they deserve, and the reason is they aren't racial minorities. Thus, Affirmative action commits the same immorality perpetrated by Jim Crow discrimination. Consequently, Premise 2 is true based on all of the above.

## 2.2 Criticism Against Argument 1

In the third section of my paper, I will criticize Argument 1, but I prefer to check the definition of discrimination first. Philosophers who regarded Affirmative action as discrimination did not offer people a clear vision of what discrimination is. Instead, they mostly were writing in this way: A is discrimination, but B is not. Nevertheless, if we have no knowledge and rational understanding of discrimination, then it's inappropriate to intuitively attribute certain actions to discrimination. Firstly, discrimination is not a comparative concept essentially. For example, women in Somalia suffer greatly from famine, so all Americans who do not suffer from famine not only discriminate against African people but also women. This weird logic as **Denise G. Réaume** named is "leveling down objection."<sup>[8]</sup> In fact, the discrimination we discuss here is "keeping minority groups in a subordinate position"<sup>[9]</sup> through policies, social institutions, norms, class stratification, etc. If the rules of social institutions produce disproportionately disadvantaged outcomes for certain salient social groups, then discrimination exists.

After I clarified the definition of discrimination in Argument 1, Premise 2 is basically false. As the second paragraph proposed, Affirmative action's goal is to increase minor groups' representation in education and employment, but they mistakenly believed that Affirmative action generates discrimination against white people who are never in a subordinate position in the United States. We cannot say an action trying to bring equality to minor racial groups is "keeping white people in a subordinate status." In reality, Affirmative action won't produce disproportionately disadvantaged outcomes, even today, after decades of debate on Affirmative action.

## 2.3 Argument of Affirmative Action's Morality

When the rules of a society's major institutions reliably produce disproportionately disadvantageous outcomes for the members of certain salient social groups and the production of such outcomes is unjust, then there is structural discrimination against the members of the groups in question, apart from any direct discrimination in which the collective or individual agents of the society might engage. 44% of Black individuals have education levels below high school, while only 30% of White individuals have education levels below high school.<sup>[10]</sup> Unadjusted differences evidenced moderate to large racial

and socioeconomic disparities in access to educational opportunity assessed through neighborhood-level early childhood education enrollment, primary school achievement, and secondary school attainment, with White children having greater access to neighborhood educational opportunity than their Black and Latinx peers.<sup>[11]</sup> Based on that, it's hard to persuade anyone that Affirmative action is structural discrimination against white people. Exactly the opposite, racial disparity in education and employment is still a significant issue, and minor groups suffer a lot from fewer opportunities because of discrimination. As a result, my argument is (Argument 2):

1. Providing opportunities to historically marginalized groups is moral.
2. Affirmative action provides opportunities to historically marginalized groups.
3. Therefore, Affirmative action is moral.

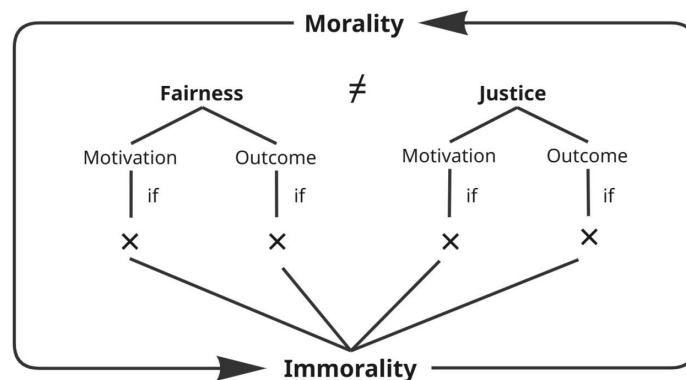
### 2.3.1 Argument 2's Truth Value

This argument is valid, so I just need to prove all of its premises are true. According to the definition of Affirmative action in the second paragraph, Premise 2 is already true. For Premise 1, it's necessary to indicate that racial minorities such as Black and Hispanic people were constantly under average socioeconomic level. As a consequence, their children were less likely to attend high school and college because of high tuition. In history, while white children sat in the classroom, Black children had worked in the factory already. Even if Black students were allowed to go to college, due to their economic and living conditions, there were many more limitations to them than white people. In addition, we shouldn't forget that it is precisely because of centuries of racial discrimination and slavery that minority communities are in their current situation. They were unwillingly exploited by the whole society which did benefit from their contribution to agriculture and industry. Nevertheless, white people treated them as properties, not humans. Providing them with opportunities is equal compensation to minor groups. Ultimately, I think I have proved Premise 2 is true.

### 2.4 A Different Perspective Regarding Morality

Last but not least, I hope to write some unusual thoughts related to not only Affirmative action but also morality. When people determine whether a behavior or an action is moral or not, the most common criterion is fairness and justice. As a result, fairness and justice are two main components of morality. However, I think morality is self-contradictory. This is because fairness cannot be equated with justice, and so reversely, which means a fair action is probably unjust, and a just action is probably unfair. For example, the French Revolution sought to bring fairness to civilians, but it killed numerous people in an unjust way. Then, future generations find it difficult to discuss the morality within the French Revolution. If an action is fair but unjust or just but unfair, we still refuse to believe that it is moral and be willing to extract its immorality. Even within fairness and justice, they harbor their own paradox. I decompose both fairness and justice into two parts: motivation and outcome. Everyone has this consensus that a good motivation won't always bring us a good outcome, and a bad motivation will bring a good outcome sometimes. I still take the French Revolution as an instance, Robespierre's motivation was good, but the outcome was bad. I draw a mind map to interpret this paragraph.

Figure 1. Transition from immorality to morality



If the concept of morality always contains its negation as immorality, which means it's difficult to use morality to judge anything, then is it possible to negate immorality by immorality in order to achieve morality? What I mean here is that we cannot analyze a thing, a behavior, and an action's morality in isolation, but should care of its connection to other things.

and socioeconomic disparities in access to educational opportunity assessed through neighborhood-level early childhood education enrollment, primary school achievement, and secondary school attainment, with White children having greater access to neighborhood educational opportunity than their Black and Latinx peers.<sup>[11]</sup> Based on that, it's hard to persuade anyone that Affirmative action is structural discrimination against white people. Exactly the opposite, racial disparity in education and employment is still a significant issue, and minor groups suffer a lot from fewer opportunities because of discrimination. As a result, my argument is (Argument 2):

1. Providing opportunities to historically marginalized groups is moral.
2. Affirmative action provides opportunities to historically marginalized groups.
3. Therefore, Affirmative action is moral.

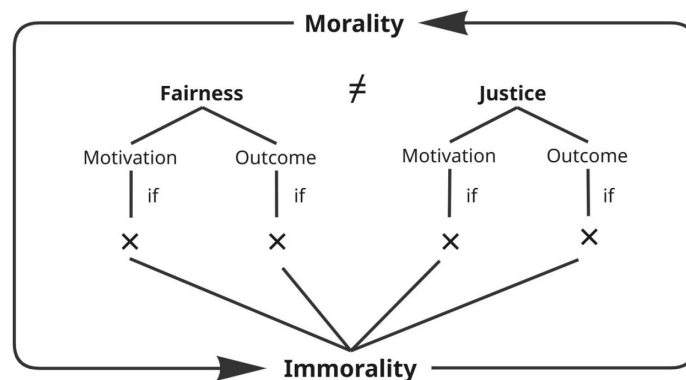
### 2.3.1 Argument 2's Truth Value

This argument is valid, so I just need to prove all of its premises are true. According to the definition of Affirmative action in the second paragraph, Premise 2 is already true. For Premise 1, it's necessary to indicate that racial minorities such as Black and Hispanic people were constantly under average socioeconomic level. As a consequence, their children were less likely to attend high school and college because of high tuition. In history, while white children sat in the classroom, Black children had worked in the factory already. Even if Black students were allowed to go to college, due to their economic and living conditions, there were many more limitations to them than white people. In addition, we shouldn't forget that it is precisely because of centuries of racial discrimination and slavery that minority communities are in their current situation. They were unwillingly exploited by the whole society which did benefit from their contribution to agriculture and industry. Nevertheless, white people treated them as properties, not humans. Providing them with opportunities is equal compensation to minor groups. Ultimately, I think I have proved Premise 2 is true.

### 2.4 A Different Perspective Regarding Morality

Last but not least, I hope to write some unusual thoughts related to not only Affirmative action but also morality. When people determine whether a behavior or an action is moral or not, the most common criterion is fairness and justice. As a result, fairness and justice are two main components of morality. However, I think morality is self-contradictory. This is because fairness cannot be equated with justice, and so reversely, which means a fair action is probably unjust, and a just action is probably unfair. For example, the French Revolution sought to bring fairness to civilians, but it killed numerous people in an unjust way. Then, future generations find it difficult to discuss the morality within the French Revolution. If an action is fair but unjust or just but unfair, we still refuse to believe that it is moral and be willing to extract its immorality. Even within fairness and justice, they harbor their own paradox. I decompose both fairness and justice into two parts: motivation and outcome. Everyone has this consensus that a good motivation won't always bring us a good outcome, and a bad motivation will bring a good outcome sometimes. I still take the French Revolution as an instance, Robespierre's motivation was good, but the outcome was bad. I draw a mind map to interpret this paragraph.

Figure 1. Transition from immorality to morality



If the concept of morality always contains its negation as immorality, which means it's difficult to use morality to judge anything, then is it possible to negate immorality by immorality in order to achieve morality? What I mean here is that we cannot analyze a thing, a behavior, and an action's morality in isolation, but should care of its connection to other things.

Morality never exists in a thing naturally. Additionally, according to the mind map, if morality contains immorality, we can reverse the whole thing that immorality contains morality within itself. It's not saying that if I kill an innocent person without any reason, then it's moral. Don't forget the connections between things. For example, Fascism Japan invaded Pearl Harbor in WWII and broke peace (immoral). In 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and 100,000 – 200,000 people died. It's unfair and unjust to bomb citizens, because they shouldn't be held accountable for the actions of their government, which they cannot represent. As a consequence, dropping atomic bombs on Japan is immoral. Nevertheless, if the United States hadn't made that decision, millions of not only Americans but also Japanese would have died and Asians still suffered because of the continuation of war. Peaceful negotiation or protests (moral) was unable to solve the issue. Bombing Japan (immoral) is a negation of Fascism Japan (immoral). An immoral action negated another immoral action, immorality negated another immorality, and the result is peace, the end of the war, which is moral. Here, the result of negating immorality by immorality is morality. Going back to Affirmative action, those philosophers could call it as immoral as discrimination against white people, but this is also an immorality negating another immorality (centuries of racial discrimination and slavery), and the final result is a more equal and diverse society (moral). I found it helpful to try to know immorality in order to know morality, which means understanding immorality is exactly understanding morality. These two concepts are opposite, but they are always unified. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.

### 3. Conclusion

Overall, Argument 1 (Affirmative action as immoral) is false, because it presupposes discrimination's definition including an unexisting detail: white people as minor groups are in a subordinate position. Providing opportunities and assisting people in need do not harm other groups' benefits. Also, in more radical thinking, even if we can call Affirmative action immoral, it's reasonable to discover the morality within immorality, which is common in a vast amount of historical events. Most importantly, the best pathway to understand morality is precisely immorality. That is to say, immorality will serve as the process to achieve morality; in other words, an objective movement exists between the two.

### Funding

no

### Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References:

- [1] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Affirmative action [EB/OL]. Stanford: Stanford University, 2001. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-action/#ContEnga>
- [2] Simons K W. Philosophical perspectives on affirmative action [J]. Michigan Law Review, 1979, 77(3): 513–538.
- [3] Newton L H. Reverse discrimination as unjustified [J]. Ethics, 1973, 83(4): 312–320.
- [4] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Affirmative action [EB/OL]. Stanford: Stanford University, 2001. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-action/#ContEnga>
- [5] Eastland T, Bennett W J. Counting by race: Equality from the founding fathers to Bakke and Weber [M]. Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1979.
- [6] Simons K W. Philosophical perspectives on affirmative action [J]. Michigan Law Review, 1979, 77(3): 513–538.
- [7] Eastland T, Bennett W J. Counting by race: Equality from the founding fathers to Bakke and Weber [M]. Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1979.
- [8] Réaume D G. Discrimination and dignity [J]. Louisiana Law Review, 2013, 63: 644–695.
- [9] Pincus F L. Discrimination comes in many forms: Individual, institutional, and structural [J]. American Behavioral Scientist, 1996, 40(2): 186–194.
- [10] Sablich L. 7 findings that illustrate racial disparities in education [EB/OL]. (2016-06-06) [2025-04-19].
- [11] Coley R L, Carey N, Hwang D, et al. Racial inequities in educational opportunity: Variation across socioeconomic status [J]. Race and Social Problems, 2024.