African-American Philosophy: Theory, Politics, and Pedagogy

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There are some features of African-American philosophy that are of immediate interest to philosophers of education. Like philosophy of education, African-American philosophy is a humanistic field of inquiry. Its turn to humanism differs, however, from the traditional motivations of Western philosophy. In the history of Western thought, humanistic anxieties emerged primarily through a sense of limitation before God and Being. For African Americans, the situation is more historically specific: Humanistic anxieties emerged over the historical reality of a people whose humanity was denied under a specific set of historical circumstances. This denial is well known under the nomenclature of modern slavery and racism. Through the course of my study of African-American philosophy, I have perused the texts of African-American theoretical work from a multitude of ideological perspectives, and I have consistently found that all these texts culminate in a statement on humanism and the philosophical problematic of the human being. The obvious fact of New World slavery, which focused primarily on people of African descent, required human assertion in the face of property centrism. As C.L.R. James puts it:

> The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, transport them in pens, work them alongside an ass or a horse and beat both with the same stick, stable them and starve them, they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings; with the intelligence and resentments of human beings.[1]

This aspect of the "underside of modernity," as Enrique Dussel has phrased it, has set the stage for the contrast between paths taken by European and dominant cultural thinkers in the New Worlds versus the conquered and colonized communities in the realm of ideas.[2] Take, for instance, the recent declarations of the death of "man" and humanism in postmodern thought. It is not only African-American moderns, but also African-American postmoderns like Cornel West and Patricia Hill Collins, who find such declarations difficult to stomach.[3] West and Collins consider themselves humanists for obvious reasons; dominant groups can "give up" humanism for the simple fact that *their humanity* is presumed, while other communities have struggled too long for the humanistic prize. To tell them that the human being is passé is to render them too late on the scene, much like, unfortunately, the 1980s and 1990s phenomenon of black mayors of cities whose capital has already taken flight.

African-American philosophy is not only humanistic. It also focuses on several concerns that have marked thought in the twentieth century. All of these concerns are amazingly embodied in the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois in the North and Frantz Fanon in the Caribbean. They are (1) problems of identity, (2) problems of liberation, and (3) problems of self-reflexive incompleteness.[4]

The problem of identity was announced metaphorically by Du Bois as the twentieth-century problem of the color line. I refer to the color line as a metaphor because it encompasses all our anxieties about difference. The color line is not only about race; it is also about divisions of humankind into borders of denied humanity.

Inasmuch as there is denial of differences any longer making a difference, we find the metaphor of racialization taking hold of every division from gender to sexual orientation in this final decade of the twentieth century. Who we are is more and more dependent on "what" we are, and as philosophers know, the realm of the "what" is a realm of definition. At the heart of the identity claim, then, is concern about essence and being; the "what" question is an ontological question.

The liberation question is marked by the twentieth century as a century concerned with progress and revolutionary change. Whether pro- or anti-revolution, anxieties over the possibility of total, systemic change emerged at first in the Bolshevik revolution and then in the countless number of decolonization efforts that marked the century's second half. The liberation question is concerned with where we ought to go, for what we ought to be striving. Philosophers would recognize this concern as the *teleological* question. How does the identity question relate to the teleological question? To know what we ought to do, we need to know who we are, and to know who we are, we often have to find out what we ought to be doing. These concerns are, in other words, symbiotic concerns. They point to values at the heart of being, and forms of being at the heart of all values.

Both the identity and liberation questions are placed into further complexity by the incompleteness question. The incompleteness question underlies all metatheoretical questions of the twentieth century. In the century's dawn, there was the continued modern hope of developing a complete explanation of reality. Such explanations unfortunately sought to develop in the human and formalistic spheres what was achieved in the sphere of the natural sciences. The problem was that in many areas of thought ranging from mathematics (for example, Alfred North Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred Jules Ayer) to the constitution of consciousness (Edmund Husserl), it became increasingly evident that completeness was a naïve dream. The German mathematician Kurt Gödel showed, for instance, that any system of thought with self-referential sophistication was incomplete, and so, too, did Jean-Paul Sartre in his existential explorations of human reality.[5] In *L'être et le néant*, Sartre showed that the negating qualities of consciousness were such that when directed to itself, it "intends" itself as other than itself. In other words, the act itself rendered its negation an ever-present possibility, which made a complete human reality — a "nature" — not possible. The human being is, for Sartre, *fundamentally* incomplete. It is such a realization that enabled Sartre to assert his credo of defending existence before essence. In effect, he was announcing the incompleteness at the heart of the human being, that a proper philosophical anthropology is one that denies any essence or totalities to human reality beyond those sedimented in the annals of history. Human nature "is" what human reality "was," and human reality will "be" what human reality "does." Methodologically, then, human reality's "humanness" is recognized when, and only when, its openness is taken heed of. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his foreword to the *Souls of Black Folk*, put it this way: We should address problems faced by human beings instead of making human beings the problem.[6] We can characterize this problem as a struggle with bad faith, a struggle with the effort to hide from the freedom encumbered by human reality.

The familiar violations of these three considerations emerge in anti-black racism. Although not all black people are Africans and not all Africans are black, that African Americans are considered a black people puts them in direct confrontation with anti-black racism.

This confrontation with anti-black racism signifies a reality not accurately articulated by the popular designation of "white supremacy." Problems with this designation emerge, for example, in analyses of racism among people of color; in regions such as Latin America, there are communities of color who will admit not being white, and who do not wish to become white, but also live an ongoing dread of being or becoming black. From a relational view of racism, racial reality is negatively constituted; it is not about what one wants to be, but instead about what one does not want to be. The consequence is that extremes such as whiteness and blackness are metastable: One is white the extent to which one is not black and black the extent to which one is not white. The problem is that there is a subtext of "fallen" humanity here the consequence of which is that one is black the extent to which one has "fallen" below humanity and less black the extent to which one has "risen" above blackness. The result is white normativity, where whiteness is the hidden designation of so-called value-neutral terms. Where whiteness is normative and, hence, neutral, one becomes racialized the extent to which one has fallen from whiteness. The significance of the term "people of color" substantiates this thesis.

African-American philosophy stands in a unique relation to American philosophy. American philosophy has primarily sought its sustenance from Europe, whether in the Deutchaphilia of the nineteenth century (and late twentieth century) or the Anglophilia and Francophilia of the twentieth century. Yes, there were periods of American foci as witnessed through the work of William James and John Dewey and now Richard Rorty, but in truth, the African-American philosophical critique is a unique challenge of origins and indigineity. In a recent work, Charles Mills has argued, for instance, that part of the New World project was to transcend the dynamics of Old World class formations, formations that were so much a part of those societies that they seemed to ooze out of Europe's soil.[7] The founding identity of the Americas (and Modern world) was a consolidation of Europeans into whites, which required a world of racialized beings. The message here is straightforward; if race is indigenous to American (and perhaps all Modern) identity, then it is, too, indigenous to American and Modern *thought*. If so, the consequence is that American philosophy goes back to the eighteenth-century debates on race and racism, and "indigenous" American philosophy becomes, as well, the unique set of existential and political theoretical responses to these arguments in the nineteenth century.

Now, we should be suspicious of our use of the term "American" here. It should be clear that what is indigenous to "America" is awfully recent since "America" is a fifteenth-century creation. Pre-America requires an understanding of another indigenous reality, and that reality, too, marks the limits of America. That reality renders America, especially North America, a space of genocide and unjust land acquisition — in a word, "conquest."

We find ourselves facing, then, two realities that mark the context of our inquiry in unique ways. On the one hand, there is the African-American challenge of inclusion and racial equality. That challenge could only have emerged in the historical reality of New World societies. For African Americans, then, their situation is ironic; no matter how unjust America is, they would not "be" without it. For the Native population on these lands, their challenge is the underlying moral theme that America should not be. America's moral fabric depends on a denied consciousness of the Native populations. That the Native population was reduced to 4 percent by 1900 through a cruel series of events that spanned the scope of the nineteenth century makes the project of denial easier since the likelihood of meeting a Native on any terms other than as a Native A*merican* is nil.[8] These two dynamics afford two interesting forms of invisibility that afford conceptions of borders that need to be crossed to afford educational equity in North America.

African-American invisibility is premised upon the view that black people should not exist. Thus, to be black is to be *too* black, to be superfluous. In Du Boisian language, it means to be a "problem," an unjustified existent. Anna Julia Cooper had characterized this dynamic in the nineteenth-century as a demand for the "worth" of black people.[9] As we think about this dynamic of problem and worth, an insidious dimension is that black people must not offer their blackness as a legitimate claim for existence. The problem is that without their blackness, they would disappear; without addressing their blackness, the ethical question of how black people should be *treated* — as all people should be treated, with respect, with dignity — would be evaded. Anxiety over blackness makes blackness, then, a reality guided by anti-black fears of reproduction and the imposition of quantitative boundaries. Each black becomes an exponential reality. For example, when I was a professor at Purdue University, I noticed that the seventeen black faculty members out of a faculty of two thousand were rarely seen walking across the campus. The situation was so racially hostile that many parked their cars right by the buildings in which they taught. I, on the other hand, decided I wanted to learn about the campus, so I took it upon myself to walk across the campus daily, either from one classroom to another on the opposite side of campus, or to the library at the campus' center. Within a few weeks, editorials began to emerge in *The Exponent*, the student newspaper, attacking affirmative action at Purdue with appeals to the growing number — nay, *deluge* — of black faculty there. After a while, it occurred to me that as I passed some faculty and students, my "appearance" triggered an exponential effect in their conscious-ness. I had become more than a black faculty member; I became *black faculty*.

Black invisibility is premised upon this odd anonymity: There is no distinction between a black individual and black people the consequence of which is that there is often an illusion of both achieved racial justice by virtue of the inclusion of one black individual and "too much" racial justice because one black is always one-too-many. This quantitative fear takes many forms; think, as well, of the anxieties over black reproduction, as we find in the stereotypes of black sexuality and the image of young, working-class black women. Thus, the more a black is phobogenically "seen," the more the black is "absent" and "invisible." In *Peau noire, masques blanc*,

Frantz Fanon eloquently characterized this phenomenon thus: When the black walks in the door, Reason walks out.[10]

For Native Americans, however, invisibility is of a different sort. Recall that America is a modern reality. What this means is that origin narratives deny a "pre" America except in Europe. Thus, even a "pre" Louisiana Purchase is treated as irrelevant material, except in narratives of "peopleless" land. Native communities are, therefore, treated as "past" communities at best. The result is that they face temporal borders in which they struggle to appear in the present and continue to the future. Native American invisibility, then, is a struggle to bring the past into the present and the future. Needless to say, their plight is ghostly, and come to think of it, the iconography of Native Americans in the general American consciousness is a ghostly one — of spirits calling from the past, of, in a word, "haunting" the present. The Du Boisian question of what does it mean to be a problem is here transformed into what does it mean to be a ghost in a house built on one's home.

The identity question invariably leads African-American philosophy to explore the lived realities of indigenous populations because of the leitmotifs of Africa and America in African-American thought. Africans in Africa are indigenous peoples. Africans in America face indigenous peoples who are not Africans while ironically being indigenous formations of the "New" society. But more, the identity question also leads African-American philosophy to explore, as well, the limitations of identity claims premised upon human closure. In other words, that these formations are limiting should not lead to nihilistic conclusions. Something must be done.

One conclusion is that we need to take on, anew, the question of the human being beyond simple-minded politics of constituency interests and material relations. We need, as well, to address the concepts by which such relations emerge. In African-American philosophy, these concerns have taken the form of a critique of essentialistic theories of human reality and the advancement of a philosophical anthropology premised on identity and liberation, on signification and praxis, on the complex dynamics of sociality as a site of culture and agency, as our next "Copernican" revolution. With such high demands, for educators there is much to be done.

The first thing is to eliminate pedagogical and intellectual nihilism. Pedagogical and intellectual nihilism emerge from teachers and knowledge producers denying their abilities to teach and produce knowledge. Such attitudes are clearly forms of bad faith. What is the point of such efforts if not to make a difference in the unfolding drama of humankind? Generations before us have been able to leave a legacy, whether good or bad, primarily because of their faith in the status of themselves as ancestors. To be an ancestor requires having descendants, which requires a different sense of responsibility toward the past, present, and future. One problem of our age is the desire to have human relations without responsibility. That is why some of us take the cowardly route of being as "hands off" as possible in our human relations. But how, if we think about it, *could* we ever produce another generation through such an attitude? Our struggle against nihilism calls for a genuinely *adult* morality. Adult morality recognizes the tragedy, pathos, irony, humor, and struggles of human reality; it recognizes that at times we will fail, but that failure is part of learning, and

the value of the struggle is such that we must persevere. Fused with the project of the teacher, the intellectual, and the student — who becomes one day both teacher and creator — the message is clear: The future's *meaning* and, thus, the future itself are in our hands.

This call to adult morality brings us to a second point. One form of escape that has emerged in our age is the false anthropological and ethical claim that we could only understand and act responsibly to those or that which is similar to ourselves. The dialectical conclusion of such an attitude, however, is that we are most responsible for those to whom we are most similar, which leads to our ultimately being most responsible to ourselves alone — in fact, not even to "our" selves but to "oneself," which, in the end, collapses into an egoistic me-myself-and-I. Such a consequence is hardly a social nor human mode of being. The error in this reasoning is that it collapses identity into identification. It is premised upon the false claim that in order to identify with the Other, we must share the same identity as the Other. But the truth of the matter is that we live identification without identity all the time: There are women who love men and men who love women; blacks who love people who are also whites and whites who love people who are also blacks; Jews who have married Muslims and Muslims who have married Jews. In the sphere of religion, our primordial insight on difference and adult morality is the God figure; many of us claim to love God and claim that God loves us even though we are not God and God is not we, and the paradoxical divide is so far yet ever so slight. For the atheist, this divide is no less: Love for the Other is simply *deontological*, a duty regardless of consequences.

Third, our concerns about identity and liberation take special form in our conceptions of the political and the pedagogical. That the U.S. lays claim to democratic politics often calls for democratic pedagogy. At the heart of such concerns, however, is the normativity of consensus. The problem is that consensus never simply appears, willy-nilly. Consensus is struggled for through conflicts of interest and reflection. In modern political philosophy, insight can be gained here from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who differentiated, in *Du contrat social*, between the will in general and the general will. The will in general is our collection of interests; it is simply the accumulation of our *individual interests*. The general will is that to which everyone can reasonably agree; it is what is the normative core of who we are and what we ought to be. Much, however, of what concerns us on the day-to-day level pertains to the will in general. And there, it is absurd to expect consensus before action since circumstances are often exigent and require decisions on a daily level. The type of reason needed, then, as Dewey pointed out in his *Logic*, is instrumental reason out of which consensus may emerge. It is instrumental reason that affords a level of resourcefulness in the human species. But ironically, instrumental reason makes no sense without goals, without teleological reason. A conclusion, then, is that it is perhaps reductive for us to bifurcate reason without context. An aim of our age, then, should be resistance to reductive reason, reason that fails to appreciate the symbiosis of instrumentality and teleology. In practical pedagogical terms, we need to encourage the spirit of possibility and sensitivity to the fact that options are often limited. We need, that is, to develop a sober conception of "utopia."

How seriously do we need to engage such a marriage of inquiry and politics? Consider the fact that right-wing and fascist forces are busily deploying instrumental reason in the service of their projects of a misanthropic future. Progressive education demands the construction of viable alternatives.

The call for negotiating the relation between instrumental and teleological reason requires a *logos* that goes beyond our traditional confines of analytical and inductive reasoning. We need, as well, to develop methods of *relevance* at the core of which is a concern for cogency and existential idiosyncracy. Sometimes, in other words, we need to know when rules should be broken, which means many of the traditional divides between fact and value, the logically analytical and the historically synthetic, need to be discarded. In this vein, we need to take on a renewed exploration of such categories as imagination and speculation, categories that have been nearly outlawed in our age of natural scientism and antipathy to the metaphysical, the wonderous, and the unpredictable.

Our philosophical anthropology that founds our politics and pedagogy should also resist human closure. In existential language, we should take responsibility for our role in *conceptual formation*, that our lived-reality of participation and action precede themes of conceptualization and essentialization. Our students should be the optimism of possibilities. In effect, this means recognizing them as sites of agency where their education is as much *their* responsibility as *ours*.

The turn to philosophical anthropology and anti-reductionism brings us to the question of universal themes. The leitmotif of Africana philosophy has also clearly been a critique of false universalism. White normativity, for instance, appeals to a universality that is so by default. By reducing the domain of humanity and the questions that are most relevant to humanity, white normativity emerges. In truth, human reality is broader in scope and relevant sets of questions.

We should not give up responsibility as thinkers and teachers for the ideas that carry human existence through time and thereby make them historical. A problem with an age of existential and political nihilism is our loss of faith in the possibility of a great thought. A million or so years...? Our species, by any estimation, has only a short time in which to make its mark in the seemingly eternal order and disorder of things. Here, the message cannot be understood in empirical terms. I appeal here to our ancestors, who, perhaps as early as the time in which they thought abstractly enough to reflect upon what they concretely saw in star-lit skies and each other's eyes, that the truth and the good are beautiful. Beauty makes no sense in a nihilistic universe. When all is said and done, the importance of our having lived and our having lived well, of our having taken the time to think a thought that *ought to have been thought* is a value that stands, perhaps hubristically, on its own terms.

It is an insult to our humanity to valorize mediocrity and spiritual laziness. Today, as nations die and become increasingly reconfigured under the weight of a single global nation while technological developments are such that the once complex has become increasingly elementary, the failure of the human spirit to live humanely, albeit explainable, is all the more existentially absurd. We need to cultivate an existence that is such that had we not existed, we, at least, *should have*.

1. C.L.R. James, T*he Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolutions*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 11-12.

2. See Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur; Rorty, Taylor; and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996).

3. Cornel West's work is familiar to most readers today, so I suggest his less known but highly important *Prophesy, Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), and Patricia Hill Collins's book is *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

4. The ideas that follow emerge in more developed form in a series of my published work, including my books *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995), *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), and *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) and my contributions to *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

5. For Kurt Gödel's work, see his essay, "Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der Principia Mathematica und verwandter Systeme I," Monatshefte *für Mathematik und Physik* 38 (1931): 173-98. For explication and articulation of some of the philosophical significance of Gödel's work, see Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman, *Gödel's Proof* (New York: New York University Press, 1958) and Susan Haack's *Philosophy of Logics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Jean-Paul Sartre's classic statement is *L'être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), and for discussion of this reading, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), "Introduction: Philosophy of Existence...Updated."

6. See W.E.B. Du Bois, T*he Souls of Black Folk*, intro. Nathan Hare and Alvin Poussaint (New York: Signet Classics, 1969), Du Bois's foreword.

7. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

8. For demographics on Native Americans, see Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

9. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., intro. M.H. Washington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

10. See Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1952), esp. chaps. 1, 5, and 6.