

Parables for a Critical Race Theory of Morality

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INTRODUCTION

[Postmodern social theory] has not sufficiently addressed the central issue of how identities and subjectivities are constructed within different moral experiences and relations, nor has it pursued with enough analytical rigor how power produces, accommodates, and challenges not simply the discourse but also the material relations of dominant political life. In other words, it has failed to develop a substantive ethical discourse and public morality that is necessary for overcoming existing forms of exploitation and subjugation.¹

It has been over twenty years since Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire wrote the preceding quote in their introduction to David Purpel's *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*. In that time, we have made a great deal of progress on many of the issues that he raises in the first part of his statement, particularly in studies on power. Critical theorists have offered insightful analyses and critiques as to how power operates, revealing the means through which oppressive social orders are perpetuated structurally in society. Critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness studies have contributed an essential and missing piece to critical theory through scholarship that demonstrates how structures and systems continue to empower whites, while disempowering people of color through white supremacy.² Education scholars applying CRT and critical whiteness studies have shown how schools function as a significant structure that operationalizes the systemic nature of education wherein white supremacy continues to be perpetuated.³ Despite the progress made in creating a more powerful language of critique, the revolutionary potential of our language of transcendence remains limited. We must consider Giroux and Freire's suggestion that we have failed to develop a transformative ethical discourse and public morality.

Little has been written that attempts to analyze the morality(ies) at work within critical theory or CRT. In fact, education scholars are largely silent in addressing morality within either of these fields. Perhaps this is because many believe there is little redemptive power in morality. Its association with oppressive and dehumanizing religious movements throughout history is certainly problematic. Yet, this is not the sole potential of morality, it's merely how we have allowed it to be limited and constrained. The conceptualization of an alternative vision of morality can provide an empowering facet to the work of critical race studies in education. A critical race theory of morality can offer a transformative ethical discourse, and in doing so, both strengthen the language of critique and contribute in a significant and necessary way to the language of transcendence. While others may be silent, Derrick Bell, one of the most pivotal figures within CRT, often referred to as its intellectual father figure, has placed a great deal of transformative importance on the choice to live an ethical life. In *Ethical Ambitions: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*, he writes,

Risk taking is a part of life whether one is ethical or not, but this is precisely why I feel it is so important to strive to become ethical. Only when we make a decision to live ethical lives, to aspire ethically, can we transform fear and our reactions to it into the reasoned resistance to the greed and exploitation that serve as a major barrier to a truly democratic society. Each

ethical action represents an ongoing commitment as we meet life's day to day challenges and opportunities, a readiness to assume risks in honor of self and all others.⁴

For Bell, the power to change, to transform, to resist, and to risk comes from one's morality. To ignore morality is to give up that power.

Designed as a theoretical exploration of morality and CRT, this essay briefly discusses more general notions of morality and its relationship to ideology, and then examines the possible conceptualization of a critical race theory of morality and the implications for educators. This essay focuses specifically on Bell's narratives. His narratives are not only some of the more well-known pieces in the field, but they also easily lend themselves to a discussion of morality.

MORALITY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO IDEOLOGY

To define morality is no easy task; it's quite a complex and contested terrain. While some have defined morality in terms of the individual, many incorporate a belief that morality is our way of being in the world, or serves to facilitate living together.⁵ I agree with Purpel's definition of morality as "the principles, rules and ideas that are related to human relationships ... how we deal with each other and with the world ... the attitudes, values and behaviors that constitute one's way of being with other people."⁶ Bernard Gert may offer the most helpful place to begin this discussion though, as his definition demonstrates what may be a more common understanding of morality, through addressing its purpose and how it functions in society. For Gert, "Morality is an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal."⁷ Understanding the significance of describing it as an "informal public system" is essential to understanding the power of morality. Morality is more than just an individual's feelings or opinions about what is right or wrong. Here we see the ways in which morality functions as a system, and is perpetuated systemically.

In order to understand how morality operates both as an oppressive structure and a potential source for empowerment, we must consider the relationship between ideology and morality. While there are numerous definitions of ideology, there are three that are significant for critical theory: ideology as (1) negative or pejorative, a false consciousness or distortion of reality; (2) necessary or descriptive, one's worldview; or (3) positive, a means through which we counter or negate structures of oppression through creating something new.⁸ One of the most illuminating pieces of critical theory is its conceptualization of ideology as a means to reproduce domination and oppression. Yet, critical theory has also shown that ideology, when used to promote praxis, can be an important tool, bringing to light the dissonance between the theory and reality of humanity's state of freedom.⁹

When we look at morality, we find a number of commonalities that suggest a significant relationship between ideology and morality, and even the possibility to conceptualize morality in a similar manner to ideology. Like ideology, morality can be positive or negative. It can be used as a hegemonic tool to further the interests of the dominant group, or it can unveil that hegemony. It can bring to light the dissonance between the theory and the reality of human freedom, or it can continue to mystify that reality. Morality seems to be one of the most important forces influencing our

conceptualization of the competing ideologies at work in shaping how we make sense of the world, and how we relate to the world and others in it. Like ideology, morality must be conceptualized as something constructed, and therefore something that can be deconstructed. Just as ideology acts as a way to make meaning of lived experiences, so does morality. While discourse is an important means through which ideology is enacted, it is through the interaction of discourse with praxis that morality is enacted. One's moral framework becomes embedded within the vocabulary of our everyday language, often imperceptibly, creating and encouraging certain dispositions. These dispositions then mediate our interactions with the world. In terms of morality, it is the acceptance of the value-laden dispositions, or legitimization of those values, that ensures one's place in a social or cultural group. In this case, morality can become a means of social control with great ease.¹⁰ One's morality dictates how one is to act, think, and feel about the world. The difference however, is that morality can do this in a very open and explicit way.¹¹ The most promising conceptualization of a critical morality understands it to be positive through its ability to be counterhegemonic while providing a means to critique the ways in which it operates as false consciousness.

While the previous conversation has highlighted the ways in which morality and ideology are similar, this is not to suggest that morality and ideology are the same thing, or that morality is merely one's ideology. Admittedly, while the similarities are clearer to me, I haven't fully thought through the differences. I still need to further analyze and clarify the ways in which morality and ideology work together. Yet, my sense is that in some way morality remains outside, perhaps, above ideology. These differences are an important piece in offering a conceptualization of a CRT of morality, thus what I offer here can only be the beginning of working toward such a morality.

Morality is a powerful force, shaping how we understand and interact with the world. Despite its power, the concept of morality has been left largely untouched within CRT scholarship, much to the detriment of our social justice goals. More conservative theories of education have openly engaged in conversations about morality, or moral education, and used it with great success in furthering their educational agendas.¹² They have created an understanding of morality — based upon individualism, autonomy, social order, and authority — that results in dehumanization. The means through which these more conservative frameworks appeal to morality in order to maintain dominance is striking, especially when one looks at it through the lens of discourse. Dismissed or reasoned away are any plausible critiques based upon the needs of a pluralist society. The defense is couched in terms of intelligence and vigilance and a right to one's own beliefs and values. While such notions of morality are based upon ideas of meritocracy, achievement ideology, and individual mobility and freedom, they conveniently ignore the conditions that deny those things to certain groups. Societal gaps based upon class, race, and gender can begin to impact a person before they are even born, continuing to grow in significance for the rest of his or her life.

By failing to engage with this idea of morality, those of us using CRT have allowed more conservative fields within education to monopolize its significance. By viewing morality as one of the more powerful mechanizations of social control used

by the Right, critical theorists abandon any transformative use of it, resulting in a severe limitation to the language of transcendence. Yet, as the discussion of morality and ideology alluded to, the conceptualization of an alternative vision of morality could provide an important and empowering facet to the work of CRT, challenging oppression and domination. It is here that Bell's work becomes important to this discussion, because when we look at Bell's narratives, we find the beginnings of such an ethical discourse or morality.

DERRICK BELL'S NARRATIVES AS PARABLES OF MORALITY

Before beginning to posit a critical race theory of morality based upon Bell's writing, we must first examine how we analyze or understand Bell's narratives. George Taylor argues that we must look at these narratives as parables with the same literary nature as the parables in the New Testament. In doing this, Taylor is not attempting to imply religious content to Bell's work, but suggesting that we may understand his work by applying the same theory of literary critique used to analyze biblical parables. In doing this, Bell's narratives become substantially more powerful than when read as mere allegories. Taylor suggests that when analyzed as parables, Bell's narratives become (1) transformative language events, (2) metaphors for discourse, and (3) manifestations of new truth.¹³

As transformative language events, Bell's narratives break through the human consciousness. They become a visceral experience created by the literal conflict presented by the parable that "turns over the listener's world and challenges its presumptions."¹⁴ The narrative, or the parable, itself becomes the disjointing experience that re-orientates the reader to other possibilities, and challenges one's understanding of morality. Reading Bell's narratives as metaphors reinforces this. To explain, Taylor draws on Paul Ricoeur: "Metaphoric predication arises when there is a 'clash' in literal meaning; metaphor creates new meaning in a space where there is literal contradiction. Metaphor destroys the literal order in order to present a new order."¹⁵ The parable becomes what Ricoeur describes as the "metaphorization of discourse," communicating something that cannot be conveyed any other way. In this way, the parable's message is about the manifestation of something new and should be judged accordingly. When we use Taylor's work to analyze Bell's narratives, we find that Bell's parables clearly point to a reframed conceptualization of morality that deconstructs and challenges the morality that upholds white supremacy. It is to this discussion that we now move.

Bell's understanding of morality is based upon the overarching premise of all of his work: the permanence of racism and the unending need to struggle against it. He writes, "Here, I again enlist the use of literary models as a more helpful vehicle than legal precedent in a continuing quest for new directions in our struggle for racial justice, a struggle we must continue even if — as I contend here — racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society."¹⁶ A morality that takes into account this permanent nature of racism, can work to combat it through challenging notions of morality that continue to perpetuate white supremacy. His is not a morality that depends upon superficial platitudes or blind idealism, but instead embraces the paradox of the permanence of racism and the necessity and

meaningfulness in continuing to fight it.¹⁷ In acknowledging the permanence, Bell never negates the need for resistance. Instead, he encourages us to continue to fight for our freedom and our humanity.¹⁸ Bell's racial realism is a formidable tool in the sustained fight against injustice, and it is a key component to his understanding of morality. In analyzing Bell's narratives as parables, we find three main facets to Bell's morality: (1) racial realism, (2) praxis, and (3) a liberation of the mind. The following elaborates on how these three components provide a basis for understanding Bell's theory of morality through the analysis of two of Bell's more well-known narratives: "The Racial Preference Licensing Act" and "Space Traders."

In "The Racial Preference Licensing Act,"¹⁹ Congress has drafted a new federal law in which white business owners can purchase a license that allows them to openly discriminate against blacks. In return, these white business owners are required to pay a three percent tax that is then used to support a variety of education and business opportunities for the black community. In signing the bill into law the president heralds it as "a daring attempt to create a brighter future for all our citizens.... It does not assume a nonexistent racial tolerance, but boldly proclaims its commitment to racial justice through the working of a marketplace."²⁰ In "Space Traders,"²¹ a science-fiction fantasy, beings from outer space arrive to arrange a trade with the United States. In exchange for all of the African Americans living in the United States, the visitors will provide enough gold to pay off all US debts, chemicals to reverse the pollution of the increasingly toxic environment, and a safe alternative fuel to replace the rapidly depleting fossil fuel. Americans have sixteen days to decide, and despite the heated debates that take place, the United States agrees to the exchange.

The racial realism of Bell's work may be the most important piece of a CRT of morality considered here. It is the foundation upon which to piece together a CRT of morality. Out of his racial realism, we find both the need and potential for praxis and a liberation of the mind. Bell's racial realism contains the disorienting and jarring nature of a parable. It is a blatant challenge to the belief that society is constantly evolving for the better, that slowly but surely we will reach that elusive state of racial equality. In the "The Racial Preference Licensing Act," he presents a challenge to the readily accepted notion that we are living in a postracial society that is moving ever closer to racial equality. To use the words of Taylor, his story "turns over the listener's world and challenges its presumptions."²² It is an attempt to break into the "human consciousness and demand the overturn of prior values ... and established conclusions."²³ Bell's narrative leaves the reader with a choice, a call to action. They can accept the truth of the parable and act on it, thus beginning the process of liberating the mind or ignore it, refusing to see the reality it presents.

His story becomes a metaphor for discourse as it challenges the unspoken ideological notions of postracialism or racial equality by presenting a reality where the existence of racism is openly admitted. For the reader indoctrinated in the ideology of white supremacy and colorblindness, the open candor of the discussions around the racial preference license is disorienting. Consider the following quote from the narrative: "We must move on toward what I predict will be a new and more candid and collaborative relationship among all our citizens. May God help us all as we seek

with His help to pioneer a new path in our continuing crusade to bring justice and harmony to all races in America.”²⁴ Here, Bell is creating an ideological clash in the reader’s mind, as he places the discussion of harmony and justice within a discussion around a legal act that would allow for open racial discrimination. Ideologically, white supremacy has allowed for the continued existence of racism, while at the same time providing people with a belief in racial equality through color blindness. Quite cleverly, Bell alludes to God and morality in the quote above, showing the ways in which morality is used explicitly to support racial inequality.

Yet Bell is not just challenging the existence of racial equality, he’s also challenging the ways in which those committed to fighting racial inequality go about it, creating another clash of realities. Consider the following dialogue between the professor and Geneva, his fictional mentor and alter ego. Geneva says, “Even after all these years, you remain as suspicious of my truths as you are faithful to the civil rights ideals that events long ago rendered obsolete.”²⁵ The ensuing discussion creates that clash between realities both for the reader who has never questioned white supremacy and the reader working to end white supremacy.

It is in this narrative that we see the ways in which morality operates in a similar ideological manner to white supremacy, supporting the idea that morality is an informal system or structure, perhaps even more powerful than the formal legal structure of law enforcement. Consider the following statement from Geneva:

Traditional civil rights laws tend to be ineffective because they are built on a law enforcement model.... But the law enforcement model for civil rights breaks down when a great number of whites are willing — because of convenience, habit, distaste, fear, or simple preference — to violate the law.²⁶

Here it becomes clear that our ideology and our morality have a stronger pull than the law, an understanding that has been exploited to the benefit of those who desire to perpetuate racism and white privilege. The law may be used at times to enforce or ensure the perpetuation of white supremacy; however, it is the ideological nature that guarantees its continuance. A reconceptualized morality would be more powerful because it can counter the ideological nature of this oppressive morality, and aid in the liberation of the mind.

Like the first narrative, “The Space Traders” also represents the ability of a parable to reorient through disorienting. Here again, through what appears to be an unimaginable story, Bell portrays his racial realism, and provides the opportunity for a transformative language event. Bell openly challenges how morality functions to support white supremacy. In one part of the story the narrator reflects,

In retrospect, though, those arguments were based on morality and assumed a willingness on the part of the President and the cabinet to be fair, or at least to balance the benefits of the Trade against the sacrifice it would require of a selected portion of the American people. Instead of outsmarting them, Golightly had done what he so frequently criticized civil rights spokespersons for doing: he had tried to get whites to do right by black people because it was right that they do so.²⁷

While the parable itself forces action on the part of the reader in terms of how they respond — either believing or ignoring, it also encourages praxis through activism. In his reflection on the narrative, Bell writes, “activism more than legal precedent is

the key to racial reform. You can't just talk about, meet about, and pray about racial discrimination. You have to confront it, challenge it, do battle."²⁸

TOWARD A CRITICAL RACE THEORY OF MORALITY

A reconceptualization of morality through the lens of CRT supports the work already being done by scholars writing on antiracist education, as we find many of the themes discussed in this essay in their work. While Bell's narratives show us the importance of concepts like praxis and liberation of the mind, other scholars demonstrate what these things mean in the realm of education. Just as Bell's narratives challenge the often-uncontested ideologies that support white supremacy, Barbara Applebaum's work on situated moral agency looks at the ways in which group location or position and white complicity must be considered when attempting to do antiracist work in the classroom.²⁹ Traditional conceptions of moral responsibility can be used to conceal white complicity.³⁰ When a dominant group's social location is left unexamined or unacknowledged, moral agency can then be used to perpetuate the social injustice it is supposed to be eradicating.³¹ But, it's not just acknowledging the way in which one's moral agency can be used to perpetuate white dominance in the classroom; it's also about challenging the ways in which white ignorance becomes an evasion of white complicity.³² A critical race theory of morality should work to challenge the ways in which morality has been used to reaffirm social injustice by calling into question the ways in which white ignorance and white complicity are enacted for the benefit of the dominant group. In other words, it brings about a liberation of the mind through ideological critique of whiteness. Once we begin the liberation of the mind, we can begin to engage in praxis. Yet, praxis requires trust on the part of all groups working against racial injustice. Too often, traditional morality is conceptualized in terms of the individual. Both Dwight Boyd³³ and Applebaum³⁴ have shown how this continues to privilege whites through the erasure of any sort of moral responsibility on the part of a group. For praxis to be possible, a critical race theory of morality must move beyond an individualized moral responsibility.

The question has been posed by scholars, "How can critical education act as a form of empowerment within and against a white supremacist context?"³⁵ Reconceptualizing morality and how we engage with this topic is one way to do this. As critical educators, scholars, and researchers we should be troubled by the present state of education. Our own morality should create a dissonance between what is and what could be. Our morality is the way in which we construct what it means to be a part of the world. It dictates our ways of being in human relationships and grounds our social consciousness. We see this when we look at Bell's work and recognize the significance of his racial realism, his call to praxis and the liberation of the mind. A critical morality should create a means to be in the world that encourages humanizing relationships. Not only can this morality counter the alienation between human beings, but it can also provide the means to understand the alienation within oneself caused by the contradictory nature of our existence that white supremacy creates.

1. Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, "Introduction," in *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education: A Curriculum for Justice and Compassion in Education*, ed. David E. Purpel (Granby, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1989), xiv.

2. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
3. Ricky Lee Allen, "Whiteness and Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, no. 2 (2004): 121–136; and Zeus Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
4. Derrick Bell, *Ethical Ambitions: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 51.
5. Purpel, *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, 66; and Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), xxv.
6. Purpel, *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, 66.
7. Bernard Gert, "The Definition of Morality," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2011 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/morality-definition/>.
8. Zeus Leonardo, *Ideology, Discourse and School Reform* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 21–22.
9. Henry A. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2000), 67.
10. Colin Wringle, "Reasons, Values and Community in Moral Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 46, no. 3 (1998): 283.
11. Gordon C. Ruscoe, "Moral Education in Revolutionary Society," *Theory into Practice* 14, no. 4 (1975): 258–63.
12. Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002); and Dwight Boyd, "A Question of Adequate Aims," *Journal of Moral Education* 25, no. 1 (1996): 21–29.
13. George H. Taylor, "Derrick Bell's Narratives as Parables," *New York University Review of Law and Social Change* 31 (2007): 235–38.
14. *Ibid.*, 235.
15. Taylor, "Derrick Bell's Narratives as Parables," 236. In his analysis, Taylor draws on Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
16. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), ix.
17. Taylor, "Derrick Bell's Narratives as Parables," 269.
18. Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, x–xi.
19. Derrick Bell, "The Racial Preference Licensing Act," in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 47–64.
20. *Ibid.*, 47.
21. Derrick Bell, "The Space Traders," in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 158–94.
22. Taylor, "Derrick Bell's Narratives as Parables," 235.
23. *Ibid.*, 235.
24. Bell, "The Racial Preference Licensing Act," 52.
25. *Ibid.*, 53.
26. *Ibid.*, 55.
27. Bell, "The Space Traders," 171.
28. Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 67.
29. Barbara Applebaum, "Situated Moral Agency: Why It Matters?," *Philosophy of Education* 2002, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 357–365, <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/1841/552>; and Barbara Applebaum, "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency, and the Subject of Resistance," *Educational Theory* 54, no. 1 (2004): 59–72.
30. Barbara Applebaum, "In the Name of Morality: Moral responsibility, Whiteness and Social Justice Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 34, no. 3 (2005): 277–90.
31. Applebaum, "Situated Moral Agency."

32. Barbara Applebaum, "Voice — For Whose Benefit? Identity — At Whose Expense? Changing Minds — At What Cost? A Rejoinder to Jackson," *Journal of Moral Education* 37, no. 2 (2008): 239–43.
33. Boyd, "A Question of Adequate Aims."
34. Applebaum, "In the Name of Morality."
35. Allen, "Whiteness and Critical Pedagogy," 122.