

1 Non-Cartesian Sums

Philosophy and the African-American Experience

Some years ago, I taught, for the first time, an introductory course in African-American philosophy. In a sense, that course led to the present book, of which this is, appropriately, the first chapter. The course forced me to think more systematically about the issue of philosophy and race than I had ever done before. Though my general area of specialization is ethics and social and political philosophy, and I am African-American (at least in the extended sense that the Caribbean is part of the Americas), my main research interests and publication focus had not been in this particular area. So I had to do more preparatory work than usual to come up with a course structure, since at that time, because of the relatively undeveloped state of African-American philosophy, I found nothing appropriate in my search for a suitable introductory text, with articles that would cover a broad range of philosophical topics from an African-American perspective and that would be accessible to undergraduates with little or no background in the subject. Often the structure of a textbook provides an organizing narrative and an expository framework for a course. Here, by contrast, I had to think the course out and locate and assign readings from a variety of sources.¹ And in order to put them all together, of course, I had to work out what African-American philosophy really was, how it was related to mainstream (Western? European/Euro-American? Dead White Guys?) philosophy—where it challenged and contradicted it, where it supplemented it, and where it was in a theoretical space of its own.

Blacks and White Philosophy

The natural starting point of my reflections was blacks and philosophy itself. There are as yet so few recognized black philosophers that the term still has something of an oxymoronic ring to it, causing double takes and occasional quickly suppressed reactions of surprise when one is introduced.² As a result, I would imagine that most black philosophers think about philosophy and race to some extent, even if they don't actually write or publish in the area. What exactly is it about philosophy that so many black people find alienating, which would explain the fact, a subject of ongoing discussion in the *APA Proceedings and Addresses*, that blacks continue to be far more underrepresented here than in most other humanities and that black graduate students generally steer away from philosophy?³

I reject explanations that attribute this pattern entirely to present-day (as against past) racist exclusion. Rather, I suggest that a major contributory cause is the self-sustaining dynamic of the "whiteness" of philosophy, not the uncontroversial whiteness of skin of most of its practitioners but what could be called, more contestably, the *conceptual* or *theoretical* whiteness of the discipline. This alone would be sufficient to discourage black graduate students contemplating a career in the academy, so that, through mechanisms familiar to those who study the reproduction of dynamic systems, certain defining traits are perpetuated unchallenged or only weakly challenged, and the socialization and credentialing of newcomers proceeds in a way that maintains the "persistently monochromatic" character of the profession.⁴

This notion is hard to tease out; it is a pretheoretical intuition, and as with all intuitions, it can be hard to convey to those who do not, in this case because of their color, spontaneously feel it in the first place. But I will make the attempt, using gender as a comparison, because of the interesting similarities and interesting differences, and because the line of argument here is far better known, even by those who do not accept it.

In an enlightening paper in *Teaching Philosophy*, Thomas Wartenberg described the experience, from the perspective of a white male instructor, of trying to see his assigned texts from the viewpoint of his female students and gradually developing a revelatory sense of the "schizophrenic relationship" they would be bound to have to works characterized by "a systematic denigration of the nature of women."⁵ There is no mystery, then, about why women are likely to feel at least some initial discomfort with classic philosophy. But the response of blacks poses more of a challenge, because for the most part blacks are simply not mentioned in classic philosophy texts. Whole anthologies could be and have been filled by the misogynistic state-

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ments of various famous philosophers, and entire books could be and have been written on the inconsistencies between the ostensibly general moral and political prescriptions of famous philosophers and their proclaimed views on the status of women.⁶ But in Western philosophy there is no rationale for black subordination in particular (as against arguments for slavery in general) that can compare in detail and in theoretical centrality to the rationale for female subordination.⁷ A collection of explicitly racist statements about blacks from the major works of the central figures in the Anglo-American canon would not be a particularly thick document.⁸ It is more that issues of race do not even arise than that blacks are continually being put down.

What, then, is the source for blacks of a likely feeling of alienness, strangeness, of not being entirely at home in this conceptual world? The answer has to be sought at another level, in a taxonomy of different kinds of silences and invisibility. The position of women in society had to be theoretically confronted by Western thinkers (after all, they were right *there* as mothers, sisters, wives) in a way that the position of enslaved blacks did not. The embarrassing moral and political problems posed by the fate of slaves could more readily be ignored, dealt with by not saying anything about them. As David Brion Davis observes in his book on slavery in Western culture: “[N]o protest against the traditional theory [of slavery] emerged from the great seventeenth-century authorities on law, or from such philosophers and men-of-letters as Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Pascal, Bayle, or Fontenelle. . . . The inherent contradiction of human slavery had always generated dualisms in thought, but by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europeans had arrived at the greatest dualism of all—the momentous division between an increasing devotion to liberty in Europe and an expanding mercantile system based on Negro [slave] labor in America. For a time most jurists and philosophers met this discrepancy simply by ignoring it.”⁹

So the result is a silence—a silence not of tacit inclusion but rather of exclusion: the black experience is not subsumed under these philosophical abstractions, despite their putative generality. An enlightening metaphor might be the notion of a parallel universe that partially overlaps with the familiar (to whites) one but then, because of crucial variations in the initial parameters, goes radically askew. For the inhabitants of this universe, the standard geometries are of limited cartographic use, conceptual apparatuses predicated on assumptions that do not hold true. It is not a question of minor deviations, which, with a bit of bending and twisting here and there, can be accommodated within the framework. Rather, so to speak,

some of the Euclidean axioms have to be rejected; a reconceptualization is necessary because the structuring logic is different. The peculiar features of the African-American experience—racial slavery, which linked biological phenotype to social subordination, and which is chronologically located in the modern epoch, ironically coincident with the emergence of liberalism’s proclamation of universal human equality—are not part of the experience represented in the abstractions of European or Euro-American philosophers. And those who have grown up in such a universe, asked to pretend that they are living in the other, will be cynically knowing, exchanging glances that signify “There the white folks go again.” They know that what is in the books is largely mythical as a *general* statement of principles, that it was never intended to be applicable to them in the first place, but that within the structure of power relations, as part of the routine, one has to pretend that it does.

Thus there is a feeling, not to put too fine a point on it, that when you get right down to it, a lot of philosophy is just white guys jerking off. Either philosophy is not about real issues in the first place but about pseudo-problems; or when it is about real problems, the emphases are in the wrong places; or crucial facts are omitted, making the whole discussion pointless; or the abstractness is really a sham for what we all know but are not allowed to say out loud. The impatience or indifference that I have sometimes detected in black students seems to derive in part from their sense that there is something strange in spending a whole course describing the logic of different moral ideals, for example, without ever mentioning that *all of them* were systematically violated for blacks. So it is not merely that the ideal was not always attained but that, more fundamentally, *this was never actually the ideal in the first place*. A lot of moral philosophy will then seem to be based on pretense, the claim that these were the principles that people strove to uphold, when in fact the real principles were the racially exclusivist ones.

The example of Locke here is paradigmatic of the kind of guilty silence I am talking about: the pillar of constitutionalist liberal democracy; the defender of the natural equality of all men; and the opponent of patriarchalism, of enslavement resulting from a war of aggression, of *all* hereditary slavery, who nevertheless had no difficulty reconciling his principles with investments in the Atlantic slave trade and a part in writing the Carolina slave constitution. Women are, of course, also unequal in the Lockean polity, but their subordination is at least addressed, explained (inconsistently) on the basis of natural disadvantage.¹⁰ But nothing at all is formally said in the *Second Treatise of Government* about justifying *black* subordination: blacks are just outside the scope of these principles. Similarly, in the

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two most widely used contemporary political texts, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, it will certainly be noticed by blacks, if not commented on, that U.S. slavery and its aftermath barely appear.¹¹ The only slavery Rawls mentions is that of antiquity, while Nozick's thoughts on the possible need for rectificatory reparations occupy a few sentences and an endnote reference. So the focus on "ideal theory" (Rawls) here will seem in part ideological, a steering away from disquieting questions and unresolved issues. It is a generalism, an abstractness, which is covertly particularistic and concrete, in that it is really based on a white experience for which these realities were not central, not that important.

And it is because of this *interconnection* between "white" principles and black philosophy that it is not really accurate, at least for African-Americans, to characterize the issue purely in terms of promoting "multiculturalism" and "cultural diversity."¹² This description would be fair enough in the case of geographically and historically discrete communities, with different cultures and worldviews, coming into contact through voluntary immigration. But in the case of the African-American experience, what is involved is a subject population simultaneously linked to and excluded from the dominant group—the "sixty percent solution" of the Constitution, the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision that blacks in America had no rights that whites were bound to respect—whose culture and worldview are, as a consequence, deeply motivated by the necessity of doing a critique of the dominant view. A lot of black thought has simply revolved around the insistent demand that whites *live up to their own (ostensibly universalist) principles*, so that African-Americans such as David Walker could challenge American slavery and white supremacy in the name of the Declaration of Independence, and the Saint-Domingue (Haitian) revolutionaries who triumphed over French colonial slavery could be described as "black Jacobins" acting in the name of the "Rights of Man."¹³ Thus African retentions in the "New World" and the elements of a syncretic new culture growing out of slavery were necessarily intellectually shaped in their development by the experience of resistance to white oppression in a way that African thought developing on the home continent in the precolonial period was not. African-Americans, as such writers as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison have always pointed out, are also African-Americans, with the result that a relationship simultaneously of influence by and opposition to white theory and practice imprints their cognition from the start. What is involved, then, is not so much a purely externalist collision of different cultures as a (partially) internalist critique of the dominant culture by those who accept many of the culture's principles but are excluded by them. In large measure, this critique has

involved telling white people things that they do not know and do not want to know, the main one being that this alternative (nonideal) universe *is* the actual one and that the local reality in which whites are at home is only a nonrepresentative part of the larger whole.

The Personal Experience of Subpersonhood

Back to the course and the problem of finding an organizing principle for it. Obviously, African-American philosophy comprises not just the philosophical writings of black people, because then any article—on the Gettier problem, on counterfactuals, on bivalence, on the French Enlightenment—would count, and of course there are such articles. The unifying theme had to be something like the struggles of people of African descent in the Americas against the different manifestations of white racism (cf. Leonard Harris's title [note 1]: *Philosophy Born of Struggle*). The political, economic, social, and legal dimensions of this struggle were clear enough and well documented. But how exactly was the philosophical aspect of this struggle to be characterized?

I decided that “personhood,” or the lack of it, could provide an ingress to this universe, and that I would work with the concept of a “subperson” as my central organizing notion. This strategy arguably captures the defining feature of the African-American experience under conditions of white supremacy (both slavery and its aftermath): that white racism so structured the world as to have negative ramifications for every sphere of black life—juridical standing, moral status, personal/racial identity, epistemic reliability, existential plight, political inclusion, social metaphysics, sexual relations, aesthetic worth.

What is a (racial) “subperson”? (The term, of course, is a translation of the useful German *Untermensch*.) What are its specific differentiae? A subperson is not an inanimate object, like a stone, which has (except perhaps for some green theorists) zero moral status. Nor is it simply a nonhuman animal, which (again, before recent movements to defend “animal rights”) would have been regarded, depending on one's Kantian or Benthamite sympathies, as outside the moral community altogether, or at best as a member with a significantly lower utility-consuming coefficient. Rather, the peculiar status of a subperson is that it is an entity which, because of phenotype, seems (from, of course, the perspective of the categorizer) human in some respects but not in others. It is a human (or, if this word already seems normatively loaded, a humanoid) who, though adult, is not fully a person. And the tensions and internal contradictions in this concept

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capture the tensions and internal contradictions of the black experience in a white-supremacist society. To be an African-American was to be, in Aristotle's conceptualization, a living tool, property with a soul, whose moral status was tugged in different directions by the dehumanizing requirements of slavery on the one hand and the (grudging and sporadic) white recognition of the objective properties blacks possessed on the other, generating an insidious array of cognitive and moral splits in both black and white consciousness. As Davis points out, "the concept of man as a material possession has always led to contradictions in law and custom . . . laws that attempted to define the slave's peculiar position as conveyable property, subject to rules respecting debt, descent, and taxation; and as a man who might be protected, punished, or prevented from exercising human capacities. . . . Everywhere [in the Americas these laws] embodied ambiguities and compromises that arose from the impossibility of acting consistently on the premise that men were things."¹⁴ This, then, is a more illuminating starting point than the assumption that in general all humans have been recognized as persons (the "default mode," so to speak). In other words, one would be taking the historical reality of a partitioned social ontology as the starting point rather than the ideal abstraction of universal equality, qualified with an embarrassed marginal asterisk or an endnote to say that there were some exceptions.

If this is your foundation, then the nature of your perspective on the world and the philosophy that grows organically out of it are bound to be radically different. Even after emancipation, you are categorized on the basis of your color as an inferior being, since modern racial slavery (unlike the slavery of antiquity) ties phenotype to subordination. So you are seen as having less mental capacity, with rights on a sliding scale from zero to a ceiling well below that of your white co-humans, a creature deemed to have no real history, who has made no global contribution to civilization, and who in general can be encroached upon with impunity. Once you have faced this social ontology without evasion and circumlocution, then the kind of problems with which you must grapple, the existential plight, the array of concepts found useful, the set of paradigmatic dilemmas, the range of concerns, is going to be significantly different from that of the mainstream white philosopher. And this means that many of the crucial episodes and foundational texts (The Great Moments in Western Philosophy) that make up the canon and the iconography of the Western tradition will have little or no resonance.

As an illustration, let me contrast two kinds of paradigmatic philosophical situations and two kinds of selves or *sums*, the Cartesian self with which

we are all familiar and an Ellisonian one that will be unfamiliar to many readers. I think that these selves epitomize the different kind of problematic involved.

The enunciation of the Cartesian *sum* can be construed as a crucial episode in European modernity. Here we have vividly portrayed the plight of the individual knower torn free from the sustaining verities of the dissolving feudal world, which had provided authority and certainty, and entering tentatively into the cognitive universe of an (as yet unrecognized) revolutionizing individualist capitalism, where all that is solid melts into air. So the crucial question is posed: "What can I know?" And out of this question, of course, comes modern epistemology, with the standard moves we all know, the challenges of skepticism, the danger of degeneration into solipsism, the idea of being enclosed in our own possibly unreliable perceptions, the question whether we can be certain other minds exist, the scenario of brains in a vat, and so forth. The Cartesian plight, represented as an allegedly universal predicament, and the foundationalist solution of knowledge of one's own existence thus become emblematic, a kind of pivotal scene for a whole way of doing philosophy and one that involves a whole program of assumptions about the world and (taken-for-granted) normative claims about what is philosophically important.

Contrast this *sum* with a different kind, that of Ralph Ellison's classic novel of the black experience, *Invisible Man*.¹⁵ What are the problems that this individual faces? Is the problem global doubt? Not at all; such a doubt would never be possible, because the whole point of subordinate black experience, or the general experience of oppressed groups, is that the subordinated are in no position to doubt the existence of the world and other people, especially that of their oppressors. It could be said that only those most solidly attached to the world have the luxury of doubting its reality, whereas those whose attachment is more precarious, whose existence is dependent on the goodwill or ill temper of others, are those compelled to recognize that it exists. The first is a function of power, the second of subjection. If your daily existence is largely defined by oppression, by *forced* intercourse with the world, it is not going to occur to you that doubt about your oppressor's existence could in any way be a serious or pressing philosophical problem; this idea will simply seem frivolous, a perk of social privilege.

The dilemmas of Ellison's black narrator, the philosophical predicament, are therefore quite different. His problem is his "invisibility," the fact that whites do not see him, take no notice of him, not because of physiological deficiency but because of the psychological "construction of their *inner*

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eyes,” which conceptually erases his existence. He is not a full person in their eyes, and so he either is not taken into account at all in their moral calculations or is accorded only diminished standing. If they did not have power over him, this white moral derangement would not matter, but they do. So his problem is to convince them that he exists, not as a physical object, a lower life form, a thing to be instrumentally treated, but as a person in the same sense that they are, and not as a means to their ends. Moreover, because of the intellectual domination these beings have over his world, he may also be frequently assailed by self-doubts, doubts about whether he is a real person who deserves their respect or perhaps an inferior being who deserves the treatment he has received. The *sum* here, then—the *sum* of those seen as subpersons—will be quite different. From the beginning it will be relational, not monadic; dialogic, not monologic: one is a subperson precisely because *others*—persons—have categorized one as such and have the power to enforce their categorization. African-American philosophy is thus inherently, definitionally *oppositional*, the philosophy produced by property that does not remain silent but insists on speaking and contesting its status. So it will be a *sum* that is metaphysical not in the Cartesian sense but in the sense of challenging a *social* ontology; not the consequent of a proof but the beginning of an affirmation of one’s self-worth, one’s reality as a person, and one’s militant insistence that others recognize it also. In the words of Ellison’s nameless narrator: “[Y]ou often doubt if you really exist. . . . You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful.”¹⁶

The universalizing pretensions of Western philosophy, which by its very abstractness and distance from vulgar reality seemed to be all-inclusive of human experience, are thereby shown to be illusory. White (male) philosophy’s confrontation of Man and Universe, or even Person and Universe, is really predicated on taking personhood for granted and thus excludes the differential experience of those who have ceaselessly had to fight to have their personhood recognized in the first place. Without even recognizing that it is doing so, Western philosophy abstracts *away* from what has been the central feature of the lives of Africans transported against their will to the Americas: the denial of black humanity and the reactive, defiant assertion of it. Secure in the uncontested *sum* of the leisurely Cartesian derivation, whites find it hard to understand the metaphysical rage and urgency permeating the *non-Cartesian sums* of those invisible native sons and

daughters who, since nobody knows their name, have to be the men who cry “I am!” and the women who demand “And ain’t I a woman?”¹⁷ From the beginning, therefore, the problems faced by those categorized as persons and those categorized as subpersons will be radically different. One can no longer speak with quite such assurance of *the* problems of philosophy; rather, these are problems for *particular* groups of human beings, and for others there will be different kinds of problems that are far more urgent. A relativizing of the discipline’s traditional hierarchies of importance and centrality thus becomes necessary.

Some Problems of (Black) Philosophy

Consider, then, how different the philosophical terrain looks, how divergently the traditional map of divisions (metaphysical, epistemological, existential, theological, ethical, aesthetic, political . . .) unfolds from this angle, and consider also the many obstacles to conveying this radically variant perspective to white philosophy majors. Drawing on a different racial experience and guided by the orthodox cartographies, they must make a significant effort to appreciate that their philosophical vantage point is not universal. Indeed, their experience will not seem to them to be racial in the first place — it will simply seem to be the *human* experience, the experience that “we” all have as part of the human condition. White experience is embedded as normative, and the embedding is so deep that its normativity is not even identified as such. For this would imply that there was some other way that things could be, whereas it is obvious that this is just the way things are. A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege becomes simply *the* relationship to the world. And black philosophy, correspondingly, necessarily appears as a somewhat deviant and peculiar exercise, contrasted not with “white” philosophy but with philosophy unqualified, philosophy *simpliciter*.

So the starting point needs to challenge this metaphysical complacency, to show that the white existential condition, the Cartesian predicament, is “white” to begin with and is quite unrepresentative. Various attempts have been made to capture the peculiarities of what Lewis Gordon calls “existence in black” (to distinguish it from a “black existentialism,” which might seem to be merely ringing the changes on the familiar Sartrean story).¹⁸ We have Ellison’s classic trope of invisibility and the related ocular metaphor of the “double-consciousness” of W. E. B. Du Bois: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro;

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”¹⁹ In both cases, the relation to the white Other is crucial, an Other not on an equal plane but with the supervisory power to determine whether one appears to (public) view and how one (privately) appears in one’s own eyes. What must be conveyed to white students in particular is the difference in the framework of philosophical investigation. Rather than being an isolated ego in a depopulated universe or a recognized member of a community of equals, one is from the start in an adversarial and asymmetrical relationship with those for whom one’s full existence is in question. As Robert Birt points out, the essential characteristic of racial domination and of black enslavement in particular is that blacks are “relegated to the subhuman, the bestial (or the category of things),” that “blacks lose altogether the status of human beings.”²⁰

And the reaction to this dilemma, the characteristic moves, will necessarily be different. One famous solution is associated with the French colonial *negritude* movement: “I feel, therefore I am.” But as critics have argued, this solution is problematic for a number of reasons, the most important being that it basically accepts and tries to put a positive face on what is essentially a nineteenth-century racist mental division of labor, in which male Europeans think, whereas others emote. What should be a protest and a proud affirmation of one’s equal humanity become instead a tacit handing over of the cognitive realm to whites. If one is seeking a sentence paradigmatic of black existential assertion, a far better candidate is the African proverb formulated by John Mbiti: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”²¹ This statement captures and expresses the crucial point that the denial of black existence is not individual, a refusal of recognition to one particular black for idiosyncratic reasons, but collective. It is not that blacks as a group do not exist because individual blacks do not exist, but rather that individual blacks do not exist because blacks as a group do not exist: the nonexistence is racial. Hence the defiant, reactive “non-Cartesian *sum*” has a collective dimension even when expressed by individuals, because it is as a result of this imputed collective property, this propensity to disappear in white eyes, that the *sum* is denied in the first place. The refusal of this ontological elimination is an affirmation simultaneously of individual and group existence.

What this points toward is the importance of understanding the world in which black philosophy (or, for that matter, white philosophy) is situated. Notions of the “metaphysical” are usually invoked only in connection with the deep structure of the Universe, and are associated, correspondingly, with the eternal and necessary. Insofar as (what is taken as) the

human condition is interpreted as inscribed directly on these underlying pillars of Being, it is difficult to think of race as ontic, especially in the light of a nouveau sophistication that declares race to be, in fact, unreal. If race is not even real for science, then how—at what is supposed to be the more foundational level of ontology—could it be real for philosophy? And the reply would be that at the level of interpersonal interaction, human beings and human Being are so radically shaped by the “second nature” of social structure that it becomes meaningful to speak of a metaphysics that is contingent and variable, real but historical, fundamental but nonnecessary: the social ontology of a racial world. Within this context one needs to locate race, not merely the overtly raced nonwhites, particularly blacks, but the seemingly unraced whites, whose racial markers vanish into the apparent universality of the colorless normative.

In this spirit, Lewis Gordon argues that for a leading black philosopher such as Frantz Fanon, “classical ontological descriptions” of the black condition are to be rejected in favor of a “sociogenic” approach that locates the anthropological in the socially existential. In other words, ontology must be historicized, so that we recognize a world that has been created “according to the expectations of a racist ontology,” a world in which “reality is racialized”—what is, in Gordon’s phrase, “an antiblack world.”²² These realities will be familiar enough to blacks, but the racial structuring of experience and knowledge in a de facto segregated society means that white students will often, in good faith, be genuinely bewildered and incredulous. Thus, for pedagogical reasons, it may be necessary to provide more of a historical and sociological background than is customary in a philosophy course. (One of my most educational early experiences after coming to the United States to teach was facing a graduate philosophy class in a southern, predominantly white university and realizing, to my astonishment, that what I had taken to be an uncontroversial banality—the centrality of racism and the subordination of blacks in U.S. history—was something that I was going to have to argue for. As a double outsider, nonwhite and non-American, I understood for the first time the kinds of evasions of the past that must be routine in the high school curricula here.) What needs to be brought home to students is that racism was not the aberrant ideology of a few Klansmen but structural and routine, a systematic set of theories and legally sanctioned institutionalized practices deeply embedded in the American polity and endorsed at the highest levels in the land. Unless I made explicit such a background history, my students could not achieve a real appreciation of the way slavery and then Jim Crow shaped national consciousness.

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Traditional notions of ontology and identity, of who and what the self is, can then be explored within this challengingly different and nontraditional framework. For example, one can look at the “metaphysical” significance in a racially structured society of being a member of the privileged race R_1 as against the subordinated race R_2 . (Or, even more dramatically, one can speculate on the implications for one’s self-concept of discovering one is “really” of race R_2 rather than race R_1 .) Correspondingly, the difference between race as a biological concept (fictitious) and race as a social construct (real) can be made clear, for example, through bringing to light the principles that stand behind the “one-drop rule” for people of mixed race when black ancestry is involved. The subject of personal identity can be interestingly translated into discussions of racial identity and how it should be adjudicated in cases of criterial conflict, for instance, when somebody looks white but has black ancestry. There is a rich body of literature in the African-American tradition that deals with issues of “passing” and with the tensions between one’s objective/intersubjective acceptance by the white world and one’s subjective phenomenological awareness of one’s role-playing.²³ Public selves and private selves, the self as socially constituted and the self as internally socially resistant, appearance and reality . . . What could be more “metaphysical” than that?

Moreover, a recognition within philosophy of this actual social ontology opens up a panorama of moral questions. When one thinks of ethics and race, the subject of affirmative action is likely to spring most readily to mind, because of the numerous discussions in the 1970s and 1980s. But a far more extensive landscape of concerns is actually lying there to be mapped. Racial self-identification has a moral as well as a metaphysical aspect in that, rightly or wrongly, people have been taken to have an obligation to identify themselves one way rather than another. It is not—or it has not usually been seen to be—up to the individual’s morally neutral taste, like choosing vanilla over chocolate ice cream. Prescriptive matters are at stake also, normative claims about one’s duties. People of “mixed” race—scare quotes are necessary here, since of course no one qualifies for the contrastive category of “pure” race—have faced this imperative most directly, since the burden has been partly on them (insofar as they have the option) to choose whether to identify with the privileged race, R_1 ; the subordinated race, R_2 ; a hybrid biracial category; or, in the challenge of the philosopher Naomi Zack, no race at all.²⁴ The standard accusation has been that a refusal to identify with the R_2 s is morally culpable, motivated by the desire to avoid their stigmatized fate, and that whatever other reasons are offered will really always be disingenuous, in bad faith.

But Zack's challenge actually has much broader reverberations; it is a gauntlet thrown down to all who continue to use racial categories. If, as most in the scientific community would now agree, race does not (biologically) exist, why should anybody, least of all those subordinated by race, continue to hold on to it? Zack, deftly and ironically, turns the "bad faith" accusation around: "[I]f racial designations are based on 'fictions and myths,' it is wrong to accept them as part of one's identity. . . . Not only is racial identification itself a web of lies constructed to rationalize oppression — and endorsing a web of lies is an epitome of bad faith — but the nature of the lies one endorses as the racialized person who is their object will impede one's freedom as an agent."²⁵ Thus for her, the discovery that race is "constructed" should provide a justification for its abandonment, not a rationale for its perpetuation. Somewhat similarly, Kwame Anthony Appiah, in a series of essays, has been pursuing what is basically the deflationary project of discrediting past Pan-Africanist and present Afrocentrist use of "race" as a category.²⁶ Appiah is concerned about the rise of black essentialism and the corollary emergence of identities that "come with normative as well as descriptive expectations," stipulating "proper black modes of behavior," thereby raising the danger of new forms of "tyranny" that threaten individual freedom and choice.²⁷ By contrast, Lucius Outlaw, with whom Appiah has been conducting a long-running dialogue over several years, insists on the need for a redemptive black nationalism for which a (suitably refurbished) notion of race is crucial.²⁸

My sympathies, as should have become evident, are with a cautious and appropriately glossed employment of "race." As I argued earlier, the notion of subpersonhood is crucial for an appreciation of the black philosophical universe, and subpersonhood is tied to race. Thus to map the moral topography generated by this ontology of persons and subpersons, and to theorize the resistance to it, "race" is indispensable. Once one concedes that the history of the United States has been explicitly racially exclusionist, with personhood being assigned on racial lines, and that the abstract moral theory outlined in standard ethics texts was really intended only to apply to a subset of the human population, the conceptual apparatus one employs must necessarily register this difference. Even normative theory presupposes a certain factual background, and if this background is radically different from what it has been represented as being, the terms and relations in the normative theory arguably need to be modified. The moral concerns of African-Americans have centered on the assertion of their personhood, a personhood that could generally be taken for granted by whites, so that blacks have had to see these theories from a location outside their purview.

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Simply proceeding as before, but now with the formalistic inclusion of blacks in the ahistorical world of the standard ethics text, will not capture these hidden moral realities.

In my course in African-American philosophy, I sought to convey this difference to white students. I began with a few pages from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, so that nonmajors could have a sense of the ideals of "personhood" and "respect" as crucial moral concepts.²⁹ I paired this excerpt with Mark Twain's famous exchange between Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally and Huckleberry Finn (whom she mistakes for Tom). When she asks whether anybody was hurt in a (mythical) riverboat accident, Huck replies: "No'm. Killed a nigger." She relievedly comments, "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."³⁰ Here, with the economy of a great artist, Twain gives us a vignette in which a whole social order is encapsulated, a world in which the moral community of full personhood terminates at the boundaries of white skin. I followed this passage with a long excerpt from William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, which tracks the maturation of the young white protagonist from his "insult" by the black Lucas Beauchamp's refusal to accept 70 cents for having saved the white boy's life to his eventual realization of the perniciousness of the moral code that tied his self-respect to the maintenance of black inequality.³¹ Finally, I presented a chapter from Richard Wright's autobiography in which he tells of growing up in the South, titled, with an appositeness perfect for the course, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow."³²

The texts by Twain, Faulkner, and Wright provided my students a sense, from fiction and autobiography, of what could be called a "naturalized" ethics—in this case a *Herrenvolk* ethics—a look at the actual moral code of a white-supremacist system and its ramifications for dominant and subordinated groups. They give us moral knowledge of a universe of persons and subpersons, where disrespect for the latter from the former was not merely permissible but mandated in order to maintain the social hierarchy, and duties and rights were apportioned accordingly. They show us the behavioral contradictions in having to interact with "living tools," human insofar as they could be communicated with about their tasks but nonhuman in lacking any say about those tasks, with one attribute always threatening to affect the other. They describe the necessity for boundary patrolling, the intricate racial etiquette devised to police this hierarchy and ensure that subordinated blacks did not forget their place and become "uppity." Finally, they make it possible to understand the characteristic themes in the black experience: African-Americans' need to insist on their personhood, sometimes at the cost of death; the strategies for subverting the order when di-

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rect confrontation was judged futile; the importance of attaining self-respect; the tensions between the elusive dream of acquiring personhood on white terms, through the embrace of white culture (the mark of the “superior” being), and the insistence that one could be culturally black *and* a person. Thus they provide the raw material from which philosophers can extract the conceptual web of an alternative order, the structuring principles of a universe, giving us knowledge in a way that merely conceding that blacks were not always treated equally would not. This universe is, as I have emphasized, not some alternative cosmos of a science-fiction writer’s imagination but *our world*. Yet if whites spontaneously generalize and universalize from their uncontested moral personhood, these moral realities will remain largely invisible to them.

For blacks, the body thus necessarily becomes central in a way it does not for whites, since this is the visible marker of black invisibility. With the exception of some phenomenological work in the Continental tradition (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) and recent explorations in feminist philosophy, the body has not traditionally entered philosophical discourse. In the modern analytic tradition, it has been at best the “general” body of the mind/body debate, the body as the thinking brain, the scientific body. But since, in our world, it is precisely the body that has been the sign of inclusion within or exclusion from the moral community (the physical sign of the natural slave that Aristotle had sought in vain), the black body arguably deserves to become a philosophical object. Unlike the neutral white (male) body, normative (“flesh-colored,” after all), unproblematic, vanishing from philosophical sight, invisibly visible, the black body is visibly invisible, deviant, nonneutral (unflesh-colored?), and problematic. So this is the “particular” body, the body for which the debate is whether it has a mind, the body as the unthinking black brain, the moral/political body. In a series of works drawing on Fanon and Sartre, Lewis Gordon has examined the existential and ontological dimensions of race from “the material standpoint of inquiry itself—the body”: “The black body lives in an antiblack world as a form of absence of human presence. . . . [T]o see the black as a thing requires the invisibility of a black’s perspective. . . . Rules that apply to white bodies . . . change when applied to black bodies. . . . [T]o see that black is to see every black.”³³ The body, then, is what incarnates one’s differential positioning in the world.

There is also, in addition to existential and ontological dimensions, a specifically aesthetic dimension, particularly for women. Many black women have felt what could be termed a carnal or somatic alienation from their bodies because of the devastating interaction of the double hegemony of a sexist norm that values women primarily for their bodies and a racist

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norm that makes the Caucasoid somatotype the standard of beauty. These stereotypes of physical attractiveness necessarily influence sexual relations also, both intraracially and interracially. Moreover, black women feel the tugs of both sisterhood and blackness, and adjudicating between them in times of conflict can be a difficult task indeed. They have had, in effect, to fight on two fronts: against the frequent sexism of black men (and their accusation that feminism is just a white woman's thing, a diversion from black transgender unity against racism) and the frequent racism of white women (too often ignorant of and indifferent to the ways in which "universal" feminist theory needs to be inflected by race-specific concerns). Black feminism has been caught in what Joy James characterizes as the "limbo" of "suspension between two states"³⁴ and has thus needed to develop a conceptual apparatus that registers the realities of racial subordination without having race loyalty automatically trump gender.

Finally, it should be emphasized that for African-American philosophers, all these problems, and many others I have no space to address, are by no means scholastic riddles to occupy an idle hour but burningly *practical* issues, problems that really are deeply troubling. There are many conceptions of philosophy, arising in part from the existence of many different philosophies, but certainly African-American/black philosophy would see itself as antipodal to a philosophy that, in one famous formulation, "leaves everything as it is." Insofar as this is a philosophy that develops out of the resistance to oppression, it is a practical and politically oriented philosophy that, long before Marx was born, sought to interpret the world correctly so as better to change it. As Fred Hord and Jonathan Lee have suggested, "philosophy is here called upon to evaluate and counter the dehumanization to which people and ideas of African descent have been subjected through the history of colonialism and of European racism."³⁵ In a broad sense, virtually all African-American philosophy is "political," insofar as the insistence on one's black humanity in a racist world is itself a political act. But other writings that are more obviously political even by narrow mainstream conceptions are usually excluded from the standard texts and narratives of this subsection of philosophy. A history of Western political philosophy that runs from Plato to Rawls while ignoring the abolitionist, anti-imperialist, antisegregationist work of such figures as David Walker, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, and Martin Luther King Jr. is a history insidiously political in its amnesiac denial of the centrality of slavery, imperialism, and Jim Crow to the history of the West. From a black perspective, both now-triumphant mainstream liberalism and its radical Marxist challenger have provided in-

adequate conceptualizations of the polity, one that has left no conceptual room to accommodate its white-supremacist character. The political philosophical concerns of African-Americans, from the classic historical debates over slavery through the post-Emancipation conflicts between rival strategies (separatist, integrationist, revolutionary) for black liberation to current prescriptions for aiding the black “underclass,” have generally been excluded from mainstream texts.³⁶ The eventual achievement of an end to black subordination will require, among other things, a redrawing of the conceptual political maps on which this subordination does not even appear.

I will conclude with a comment on philosophy courses and, more broadly, the revision of the curriculum. Seeking to placate black critics merely by adding a course or two in African-American philosophy and then continuing essentially as before cannot be a genuine answer to the long-term problem of canon reform. For when this is done, what happens, of course, is that these courses are simply ghettoized, considered peripheral to the core of the discipline, not to be taken seriously by real philosophers. Rather, what is desirable is a transformation of the mainstream curriculum so that even a general introductory course will include such material to make students realize the variety of human experiences and the corresponding multiplicity of philosophical perspectives. We need to look at the traditional main divisions of the field—metaphysics, epistemology, logic, value theory—and ask how their subject matter could be changed by the explicit incorporation of race, by writing “race” and seeing what difference it makes.³⁷

In some cases, there seems to be little room for race to make a difference; it hardly makes sense to talk about developing a peculiarly African-American symbolic logic. In other areas, such as those I have indicated here, the possibilities are obviously far greater: philosophy of existence, social ontology and personal identity, ethics, feminism, political philosophy. But there is room for innovation elsewhere also, as more black philosophers enter the profession and more literature is produced. Epistemology courses with a subsection on standpoint theory could include material on race as well as gender; “naturalized” epistemology and cognitive psychology discussions could consider the pervasiveness, as a mental phenomenon, of white cognitive dysfunction and self-deception on matters of race and its necessitation by a situation of privilege based on systematic racial oppression. Debates from critical race theory could supplement standard presentations in philosophy of law and be used to trace the peculiar trajectory of blacks’ status as rightsholders in the United States. Aesthetics courses could

examine the historical challenge of articulating a black aesthetic. In philosophy of religion, specific problems of black theodicies could be added to the usual set of themes. The black tradition of “signifying” could be explored for its possible repercussions for mainstream philosophy of language. Philosophy of science courses could look at the history of “scientific racism” and what this development says about the social determinants of scientific investigation; analogously, philosophy of history courses could look at Aryanism and its impact on the fabrication of the historical record. Finally, in the standard narratives of the history of philosophy itself, quite apart from the currently contested and controversial claims about the influence of ancient Egypt on ancient Greece, the relation between modern European thought and modern European expansionism needs to be made explicit, so that the extent to which modernity involves interrelated conceptions of white personhood and nonwhite subpersonhood, white civilization and nonwhite “savagery” can be appreciated.

White students who take such courses would not only have an incentive to find out more about the black experience; they would be provided with better philosophical insight into their own reality, insofar as “whiteness” and “blackness” have reciprocally (though not equally or harmoniously) determined each other.³⁸ Black students would be given the recognition currently denied by illusorily general abstractions that pretend to a representativeness they do not in fact achieve. The aim would be to transform the discipline so that the eyes of the former are opened and the eyes of the latter do not glaze over, both visions converging in agreement about the real nature of the world we are living in and how its problems can be remedied so that black *sums* and white *sums* are no longer in a zero-sum game.

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