An Illuminating Blackness

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CHARLES W. MILLS

If philosophy is definitionally an exercise in enlightenment, the illumination of oneself and the world, then how could philosophy ever be *black?* Surely this is the very color of the darkness that we want illuminated and eliminated, both internally and externally. It is whiteness that is classically the color of enlightenment, not to mention Enlightenment. Moreover—in terms of actual electromagnetic radiation—any physicist will be happy to inform us that white light already includes all the colors of the visible spectrum, while blackness turns out to be not really a color at all, but the *absence* of all light and color. So it would seem that any metaphors drawn from this realm already conceptually foredoom the enterprise. Whiteness is light; whiteness is all-encompassing; whiteness is the universal. How could genuine philosophy be anything *but* white?

And the obvious answer is . . . it all depends on how you choose your metaphors.[1]

Consider another way of looking at things, another set of linked metaphors, though still within the realm of the optical: whiteness as glare, whiteness as dazzle, whiteness as blinding, whiteness as the "Monopolated Light & Power" of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.[2] In the prologue to Ellison's novel, his nameless black narrator—surrounded in his secret basement by 1,369 lightbulbs—tells us: "I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa."[3] But the illumination he has attained over the novel's quest (as he looks back in a prologue that is really a postscript) has been achieved despite, not with the help of, the Jim Crowed white power source represented by Monopolated, and its attempted totalitarian control of his vision. Whiteness here is constructed not by inclusion of the other colors but by their official exclusion, an "Optic White" for "Keeping America Pure," even if an unacknowledged black base lies at the heart of its "purity."[4] Figuring whiteness in this way demystifies its chromatic pretensions and the related illusions of the Eurocentric worldview that has biased objective inquiry into the workings of the world. Seen through this alternative prism, whiteness is a willed darkness; whiteness is segregated investigation; whiteness is the particular masquerading as the universal.

From this revisionist perspective, then, we can appreciate how a philosophy coming out of blackness could actually be better situated to carry out the Enlightenment project than its designated "legitimate"

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representatives. But first we need to clarify: What is black philosophy? To begin with, it is not simply the philosophy produced by people of (recent) African origins, whether in Africa or the diaspora. If race is a product of the modern period, as many postwar commentators have argued,[5] black philosophy cannot exist before blackness exists. Thinkers in the Africa of, say, 1000 CE would not have been black, and so would not have been doing black philosophy when they philosophized.

But the second and more important point is that even after the emergence of blackness as a social category and social reality, it seems dubious to categorize all the philosophizing of blacks as black philosophy. If the mere identity of the practitioners constituted a sufficient condition, then work by blacks in mainstream metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language, value theory, history of philosophy, and so on, that is in no way informed by blackness or race or the African-American experience would count as "black" philosophy even if it were indistinguishable from work produced by European and Euro-American philosophers. Clearly such a conclusion is quite counterintuitive. So we need to differentiate the identity of the philosophers from the identity of the philosophy, and separate the question of *who they are* from the question of *what it is*. Black philosophy will, of course, predominantly be done by black philosophers—this is not a contingent correlation. But it cannot be turned into a definitional truth.

In my opinion, the best way to conceptualize the defining features of black philosophy is as the philosophy that develops out of the distinctive experience of racial subordination in modernity—a philosophy that in its effort to understand and end that subordination, illuminates modernity more thoroughly and relentlessly, more free from illusions, than its white antagonist. Blackness really indicates not a particular band of wavelengths but a particular social position, and not just any subordinated nonwhite position but a peculiar location within the nexus of multiple oppressions created by white supremacy. And if, as "standpoint theorists" in epistemology have been arguing for several decades now (though largely white feminists with respect to gender), social subordination affords one distinctive insight, this means that blacks have been peculiarly well placed to theorize, from the underside (think of Ellison's narrator in his basement), the actual material and normative topography of this racialized world.

Consider the "big three" of structural social oppression: gender, class, and race. Of these, both gender and class clearly predate the modern period, in patriarchal systems of various kinds stretching back to the early formation of the species, and in class societies evolving in separate continents out of hunter-gatherer communities. But race is different. Controversy exists as to whether race as a concept and shaper of thought is distinctively modern or goes back to antiquity.[6] But even if race as an idea is older than the conventional postwar narrative would claim, race as a planetary system is unambiguously modern. It is European expansionism in the modern period that internationalizes race, creating a white supremacy that becomes global by the early twentieth century.[7] So although gender and class are, of course, also part of this matrix of interlocking oppressions

generated by empire, race is the element that is new and whose synthesizing effect shapes the transmutation of these premodern categories into their distinctively modern forms. To the extent that white supremacy gradually spreads, in material structures and overarching norms, across the planet, it henceforth ceases to be possible to speak simply of "gender" and "class," for these identities will now be racialized.

And this means, as the disproportionately black and female pioneering theorists of "intersectionality" have taught us,[8] that insofar as white racial identity tends to trump gender and class—with the white woman and the white worker generally making common cause with the white male bourgeois directors of the colonial project rather than with their sisters and brothers of color in resistance to it—both white feminism and white class theory will be cognitively handicapped. White women and the white working class will generally find it harder to recognize and theorize racial oppression, from which they benefit, whether through the land and resources from indigenous expropriation, the racial exploitation of African slavery and the subsequent social denial to blacks of equal opportunities, or their privileged European citizenship of the imperial powers. This is not to deny the existence of that historic handful of white progressives, male and female, who have overcome their socialization to demand an end to *all* forms of subordination. But the reality is that white racial privilege has generally distorted the clarity of vision one would have hoped for from those experiencing intra-white gender and class oppression. While white feminism and white Marxism have produced distinctive and invaluable insights as oppositional bodies of thought within the Western tradition, they have usually failed to see white supremacy as a system in itself.

Black philosophy, then, particularly in its intersectionalist rather than its dominant black male form, emerges as the philosophy of those at the bottom of this interlocking set of oppressions. And I would suggest that the distinctive racialization of blacks offers insights into the workings of white supremacy not always as readily available from other nonwhite cognitive locations in this system.

Consider the major varieties of white Western racism of the modern period: anti-Semitism in its racial form; anti-black racism; anti–Native American racism; anti-Arab racism; anti-Asian racism; anti-Latino racism; anti–Australian Aborigine racism. Anti-Semitism is generally judged to have been discredited in the West, except for racist fringe groups, by the Holocaust, and Jews are today accepted as "white" in Western nations, certainly in the United States. Moreover, anti-Semitism was never integral to the colonial project. Anti–Native American racism was, obviously, central to the creation of the United States, but the genocide of Native Americans and the creation of the reservation system means that today they are a marginal presence in the daily life of the white polity. In addition, though their racial categorization—"Indians"—was crucial to white settler ideology, it is not generally one that they have embraced themselves, except for contingent reasons of political solidarity against the white man, since they retain their preconquest civilizational identities. The same could be said about Australian Aborigines, who have sometimes self-identified as

"blacks"—both as a reclamation and positive inversion of the derogatory white settler term used for them and in partial emulation of the black American struggle—but have their diverse ethnic belongings to fall back on. Islamophobia has been judged by some theorists to be a form of medieval cultural anti-Arab racism, and thus long embedded in the Western tradition, even before its renascence in recent decades as a result of Middle East politics and the growth of anti-Western terrorist movements. But in part because of the legacy of the Arab slave trade, blacks have themselves often been seen in racist terms by Arabs, and religion rather than race was the banner under which the Arab anticolonial struggle was fought. "Asians" as a racial, as against continental, category attempts to subsume into one group people from very different nations with different languages, cultural histories, and in some cases traditions of extensive conflict with one another. And again, their national identities, even in immigrant communities in the United States, often trump their imputed/constructed "racial" identity, since unlike (some) Native Americans and Native Australians, they suffered less damage from Western colonialism's attempted eradication of their national cultures through violence and the lure of assimilation. Finally, Latinos are not only, like Asians, citizens of many different nations, but do not even have the "racial" commonalities that would justify a clear-cut racial category. Hence the ongoing debate as to whether they should really be seen as a race in the first place or as an ethnic group composed of many races, with "whiteness" a preferred choice for many of them, and a tradition of derogation of Afro-Latinos.[9] *The position of blacks is unique among all the groups racialized as nonwhite by the modern West; for no other nonwhite group has race been so enduringly constitutive of their identity and so enduringly central to white racial consciousness and global racial consciousness in general.*[10]

My claim is, then, that black philosophy is more likely to be systematically devoted to the project of developing a consistently antiracist understanding of race than the "racial" philosophies (to the extent that they exist) of other nonwhite racialized groups. The peculiar experience of Africans under Western modernity, which originally turned them into "negroes" (lowercase), creating a race where previously none had existed, impressed a forced diaspora on them that took them to Europe and the Americas (unlike Amerindians and Native Australians, who generally remained at home), made the extraction of their labor central to the making of the modern world,[11] thus requiring them to be part of the Western polity while simultaneously excluding them from equal membership in that polity (aboriginal land is also central to this making, but the presence of its inhabitants is not necessary), attempted to deprive them of their original civilizational and national identities, so that race in the diaspora became the central "practical" identity[12] for them, oppositionally resignified from stigma to badge of pride, while still leaving them globally identifiable as the people who were appropriately designated a "slave race" in modernity, the very period when slavery was dead or dying in the West, their physical features instantly recognizable across the planet both because of a higher degree of phenotypical distinctiveness (whites/blacks

as a polar contrast) and because of this slave legacy and its associations, reinforced moreover by the seeming fact that even today no other continent of origin continues to have the problems of the African one, which remains "Dark," while China and India are global success stories. In sum, no other group has had the distinctive combination of experience, motivation, lack of alternative identitarian resources, and intimate and quotidian familiarity with the ideologies and practices of the West to be better positioned to understand race from the inside. It is no accident, then, that what has recently been christened "critical philosophy of race"[13] has been pioneered by blacks, for no other "race" has felt so imperatively the need to make sense of a world that has been more thoroughly and unforgivingly structured by race for them than for any other group, with no way out except to turn race to emancipatory purposes. Black philosophy is primarily critical philosophy of race drawing on the experience of black racial subordination.

And that brings us back to the promise of the universal. As the phrase implies, "standpoint theory" is a theory about epistemic locations, not individuals. The claim is not that "blackness" confers any kind of automatic veridical insight upon you: blacks are as capable of being racist and sexist as everybody else. After all, black womanism arose in large measure precisely because of the need to combat black male sexism. What standpoint theory presumes is that taking up a perspective shaped by social subordination, especially when it is open to multiple varieties of subordination, orients one epistemically in a way *more likely to be* illuminating of the true nature of the social system than viewpoints taking for granted class, race, and gender privileges and their accompanying phenomenology. Onora O'Neill has famously argued that the problem with mainstream ethics and political philosophy is that it typically employs *idealizing* abstractions, not in the innocuous sense of selecting certain features of reality to take to the higher level of the model (since any theoretical abstraction necessarily does this), but in the problematic sense of abstracting away from social oppression and its fundamental shaping effect on people and society in carrying out such modeling.[14] The flawed abstractions typical of white social and political philosophy are of this form; they whitewash, they white-out, crucial aspects of social reality, above all the fact of white racial domination and its holistic impact over the past few hundred years. In the useful phrase of Joe Feagin's recent book, they give us a "white racial frame" through which to (mis) apprehend the world.[15] So what are being represented as abstract universals are really whitewashed particulars that have been polished up and Platonized. In theorizing the intersection of gender, class, and race, black philosophy thus holds the potential for a correction of the deficiencies that white racial privilege introduces into other bodies of oppositional theory, such as white feminism and white class theory. It is in this respect that black philosophy is potentially better positioned to realize the genuine (as against bogus) universal.

Finally, as a closing example (to allay fears of a black chauvinism), let me cite Nick Nesbitt's recent account of the Haitian Revolution.[16] Nesbitt demonstrates both how the Haitian Revolution was the most universal of

its time, eclipsing the American and French Revolutions, and why it was necessary for a coordinated North Atlantic "Monopolated" white power to darken its universalist emancipatory beacon. And in the process he also shows how he, a white scholar, can adopt the illuminating vision, the radical enlightenment viewpoint, of a transformative black philosophy—a rainbowed vision, potentially containing all colors, for all of us.

Notes

1. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By,* 2nd ed. (1980; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 5.

3. Ibid., p. 13.

4. Ibid., pp. 196, 212–218.

5. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

6. Ibid.; Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* eds. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (1903; Boston: Bedford Books, 1997); Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age,* 4th ed. (1969; London: Serif, 1996); Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

8. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995).

9. See, for example, Jorge J. E. Gracia, ed., *Race or Ethnicity: On Black and Latino Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

10. It is generally recognized that of all the many problematic claims in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew,* trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), the most egregious is that the anti-Semite creates the Jew. (See, for example, Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004], chapter 2.) But the Negrophobe does create the negro.

11. David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

12. Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

13. See the editors' letter introducing the new journal *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1, no. 1 (2013).

14. Onora O'Neill, "Justice, Gender, and International Boundaries," in *The Quality of Life,* eds. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993).

15. Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

16. Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).