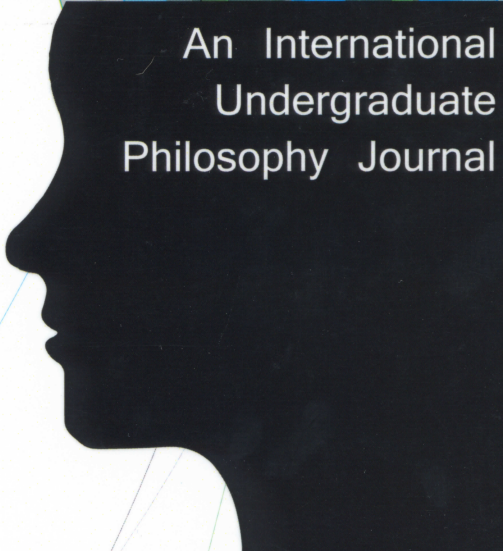




# STANCE

An International  
Undergraduate  
Philosophy Journal





# STANCE

An International Undergraduate Philosophy Journal

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# The Contemporary American Child as a Docile Consumptive Body

*Camilla Cannon*

**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that the contemporary relationship between children and advertising can be seen as illustrative of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and docile body production. I contend that, within the context of a consumption-based economy, an individual's prime utility is her rate of personal consumption. Therefore, the subjection of children to ubiquitous advertising can be seen as the discipline through which the utility of personal consumption is maximized.

## Introduction

In this paper, I argue that Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and docile body production is manifest in the contemporary relationship between children and advertising. Foucault argues that disciplinary power strives to maximize each individual's utility as determined by the greater social system of which she is a part.<sup>1</sup> For example, disciplinary power as inscribed upon a factory worker is designed to encourage maximum speed, minimal error, and group cohesiveness. Within the context of a consumption-based capitalist society, a prime marker of an individual's "utility" is the rate at which one consumes. This contention is supported by the fact that, as per the Federal Reserve's 2013 GDP report, consumer spending counted for 71 percent of yearly GDP in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Within the context of a consumption-based economy, the creation of docile bodies has been refocused towards instilling in children an obligatory response (consumption) to a particular learned stimuli (advertising). I believe: (1) enticements to consume, in the form of direct or indirect advertising, have come to permeate the spatial and temporal realities of American children, and (2) the ubiquity of such enticements, in the form of "discipline," produces citizens who remain docile and consumptive even after

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1997), 115.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Research Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, *Graph: Personal Consumption Expenditures/Gross Domestic Product*, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/graph/?g=hh3>.



childhood. I examine two ways in which the productive nature of disciplinary power is demonstrated: (1) the internalization of a consumer-materialist mindset on the part of children exposed to heavily targeted advertising and (2) the transformative effect such ubiquitous advertising has on both the spatial and temporal realities of children's bodies. In order to demonstrate the psychological effects of ubiquitous advertising on children, I will rely heavily on a report from the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Advertising and Children entitled *Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood*.<sup>3</sup>

### **Foucault's Theory of Body Docility and Disciplinary Power**

Foucault defines a docile body as one "that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved."<sup>4</sup> Bodies are made docile through disciplines, which Foucault defines as "the meticulous control of the operations of the body."<sup>5</sup> The purpose of discipline is to accomplish "the maximum extraction of force and time" from each constituent individual of a larger whole.<sup>6</sup> Discipline guarantees that each individual reaches her maximum utility as defined by the greater economic or social system of which she is a part. The utility of the pupil is to be maximally obedient, the factory worker to be maximally efficient, the soldier to manipulate both her weapon and her body in the method deemed maximally desirable by the military strategists of the time. I divide Foucault's modes of disciplinary training into three basic categories: spatial, temporal, and signal-response.

Spatially, individuals are constrained by what Foucault calls "the art of distributions," which are the method by which schools, hospitals, and prisons determine where each individual will reside in space (e.g., seating charts in classrooms, prison architecture, the floor plans of a hospital).<sup>7</sup> According to Foucault, the purpose of spatio-disciplinary control is both to encourage overall efficiency and to remind each individual of one's constituent role within a greater whole: "Each individual has his own place, and each place its individual."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association [APA], *APA Task Force on Advertising and Children: Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood*, 2004, <http://adage.com/images/random/childrenads022404.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-148.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Temporally, individuals are constrained by what Foucault calls "the control of activity."<sup>9</sup> This discipline manifests in the implementation of schedules and the drawing up of time tables. Foucault uses an elementary school schedule as an example of how the implementation of time tables serves to extend and specify control on a minute level: "8.45 entrance of the monitor, 8.52 the monitor's summons, 8.56 entrance of the children and prayer, 9.00 children go to their benches, 9.04 first slate...."<sup>10</sup>

The third form of training discussed by Foucault is the "composition of forces."<sup>11</sup> While spatial and temporal control serve to construct the reality of an individual's surrounding environment, the composition of forces serves to exert control over an individual's very physicality. This control over physicality is accomplished by disciplines that train bodies to perform tasks and react to stimuli in highly specified, meticulously instructed ways. In order to introduce this concept, Foucault once again returns to an examination of seventeenth-century French military science. Foucault explains that, with the introduction of the rifle into military science, the "technical problem of infantry had been freed from the physical model of mass" and reconfigured towards ensuring that each individual soldier be trained to manipulate her weapon and her body more generally in the way deemed maximally efficient for the unit as a whole.<sup>12</sup> In Foucault's words, "The body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others.... The soldier is above all a fragment of mobile space."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the soldier is no longer defined by the nature of her individual character; instead, each soldier is associated with her body. That body is nothing more than a single unit of a greater whole, which must be submitted to various disciplines in order to maximize the utility (efficiency) assigned to it by a given social system (military science).

A crucial aspect of the composition of forces is the stimuli-response relationship. As Foucault states, "All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions" that "must trigger off the required behavior."<sup>14</sup> In order for the disciplined individual to reach her maximum utility as determined by the greater social system of which she is a part, she

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.



must be trained to respond to specific stimuli in highly predictable ways. A particularly illustrative example provided by Foucault is that of the typical French schoolchild, who knows to open her book at the single striking of a signal bell, repeat a mispronounced word when the signal bell is struck twice, and begin the paragraph from the beginning when the bell is struck three times.<sup>15</sup> This is the most important requirement of a docile body: the extent to which an individual reacts to certain stimuli exactly as she has been trained to do.

### **Advertising as Discipline; Children's Bodies as Docile Bodies**

In order to support my claim that enticements to consume have followed the pattern of disciplinary power laid out by Foucault, I must establish that advertising has permeated the life of an individual subject as completely as Foucault's three modes of discipline suggest.

Foucault states that the efficacy of disciplinary power is at least partially due to the fact that it is "both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade...and absolutely 'discreet,' for it functions permanently and largely in silence."<sup>16</sup> In other words, disciplinary power, embodied by the implementation of time tables, the assignment of individuals in space, and meticulous signal-based training, is a particularly effective form of power because it necessarily leaves no aspect of an individual's life—either spatial or temporal—in which to experience a reality uninformed by the normalizing tendencies of the prevailing disciplinary order. The schoolchild has no *time* in which to question her greater social context because literally every minute of her school day is planned and dedicated to a specific task. Likewise, the prisoner lacks a spatial arena in which a similar kind of non-ideologically informed introspection may take place. Let us explore these two modes of disciplinary control—spatial and temporal—in relation to children and advertising.

#### *Temporal Control*

Temporally, children's days are divided between two areas that have been given over to advertising: leisure time and school time. According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation report, the

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-167.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

average American between the ages of 8 and 18 spends about 7 hours and 38 minutes per day consuming some form of entertainment, strung across diverse platforms such as television, smartphones, and computers.<sup>17</sup> Given that the vast majority of free internet content is ad-supported, these 7 hours per day are likely as imbued with advertising messages as television-viewing. Given that the vast majority of American children spend the largest chunk of weekdays in school, it follows that the 7 hours of entertainment consumption per day detailed by the Kaiser report constitute the majority of children's non-school time.

Many American public schools now welcome advertising as a formal component of a child's education in order to generate more revenue and/or receive discounted products. For instance, one-third of U.S. middle and high schools show their students a current event newscast, which includes advertising messages between segments.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, commercialization has entered the public school by way of "posters, billboards, corporate-sponsored educational materials, and product placements in textbooks."<sup>19</sup> While schools pursue such relationships with companies in order to further the noble goal of increasing the financial resources with which they can assist their students, the intrusion of advertising into the educational sphere results in the further reduction of an advertising-free space for most children.

In the section of *Discipline and Punish* concerned with the historical implementation of time tables, Foucault references the way in which seventeenth-century educational science seeks to assign a particular disciplinary technique to each moment of a schoolchild's day (e.g., "8.45 entrance of the monitor, 8.52 the monitor's summons, 8.56 entrance of the children and prayer, 9.00 children go to their benches, 9.04 first slate..."<sup>20</sup>). In order to understand the ways in which enticements to consume inform the realities of contemporary American children, it is helpful to imagine an average child's daily time table: 7:45 listen to the radio on the way to school, 8:30 watch corporate news and its attendant commercials in homeroom, 12:00 get a fast food meal in the high school's food court, 4:00 go home and watch television with parents, 7:00 watch streaming video with friends, and stay glued to smartphone throughout the day. What is salient about such

<sup>17</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds*, 2010, <http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/8010.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> APA, *APA Task Force*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 150.



a time table is the lack of a temporal window uninformed by the consumptive imperative; like the child in Foucault's seventeenth-century France, the average contemporary American child lacks a window of time in which to question the reigning ideology of her social context.

### *Spatial Control*

Spatially, children are bombarded with enticements to consume in two ways. First, children are as susceptible as the rest of the population to the explosion of print advertising messages that have come to plaster much of America's "public" places, such as billboards, subway ads, and even advertisements placed on the insides of bathroom stalls. A 2007 *New York Times* article quoted a market research expert who estimated that "a person living in a city thirty years ago saw up to two thousand advertisements a day, compared with up to five thousand today."<sup>21</sup> Second, the more than seven hours per day of entertainment consumption is experienced by each individual child largely within the specific spatial domains that have been assigned to her: watching television in the living room, watching streaming video in her bedroom, browsing the Internet on her smartphone on the bus or surreptitiously under her desk in algebra class. Insofar as advertising can be understood to have an agenda, that agenda has successfully infiltrated the private spatial domains of American children, making those domains essentially ideological.

The ideological giving-over of the spatial arenas in which children exist is not only the mode by which Foucault's theory of the spatial effects of disciplinary power are manifest in the contemporary relationship between children and advertising. The amount of time that children spend consuming advertising-imbued media via technological platforms has started to affect the spatial realities of children's bodies. In 2013, the Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board in Wales commissioned a study examining the relationship between tablet use and poor posture "after it found that the number of children treated for back and neck pain had doubled in just six months." The study concluded that 64 percent of students ages seven to eighteen had experienced severe back pain:

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<sup>21</sup> Louise Story, "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad," *New York Times*, January 15, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/media/15everywhere.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/media/15everywhere.html?_r=1&).



a finding that the Board's physiologists linked to an increasingly sedentary, tablet- and smartphone-centric lifestyle.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, doctors at the University of Nebraska have linked early-childhood technology use in children to increases in poor eyesight and weight problems.<sup>23</sup>

What is salient about this information is not the detrimental health effects described; rather, what is important is the fact that the prescribed physicality of a technology-based, consumption-encouraging lifestyle (sedentary, passive, receptive) has altered the spatiality not only of children's environments but also of children's bodies. While discussing the ways in which soldiers in eighteenth-century France were subjected to disciplinary control in order to encourage maximally efficient weapons handling and group cohesiveness, Foucault states, "Disciplinary control....imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed."<sup>24</sup> The efficiency required by the power system of Foucault's example was the ability of a soldier to quickly and effectively handle a weapon; the efficiency required by the power system of consumption-based capitalism is constant subjection to the consumptive imperative; namely, passive reception of ubiquitous advertising. Thus, as a child's body literally morphs to accommodate the frequency with which she hunches over a tablet screen, watches videos on computer screens while lying down in bed, or cranes her neck to peek at her social media feed under her desk in Algebra class, an additional dimension of Foucault's theory of body docility becomes manifest: the ability of disciplinary power to alter not only an individual's behavior but, indeed, to alter an individual's physicality.

### *Anatomo-Chronological Control and the Stimuli-Response Relationship*

While both the spatial and temporal dimensions of advertising-as-discipline are fundamental aspects of docile body production, what is most salient about these mechanisms is that they exist in tandem. The temporal infiltration of the consumptive imperative,

<sup>22</sup> Cardinus Risk Management, *Tens of thousands of children are facing a lifetime of back pains and misery*, 2013, <http://www.ergonomics4kids.com/pdf/Healthy%20Working%20Back%20Pain%20Misery%2027%20Nov.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> YaeBin Kim, "Young Children in the Digital Age," *University of Nevada Cooperative Extension*, 2013, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cy/2013/fs1322.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 152.



combined with both the introduction of enticements to consume in formally “private” spatial domains and the altered physicality of the child’s body, results in the realization of an “anatamo-chronological schema of behaviour” described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>25</sup> The ability of the consumptive imperative to construct both the temporal and spatial realities of children creates a kind of overarching behavioral web within which all behaviors and perceptions necessarily occur. The presence and continued expansion of this web allows for the realization of Foucault’s third aspect of docile body production: the predictable and particular response of the individual to learned stimuli.

In his section on docile bodies, Foucault recounts the entrance of disciplinary training into the early school environment. He describes a method of school discipline envisioned by LaSalle in which the pattern of bell-strokes made by a teacher would, through repetition and training, result in the immediate and compulsory completion of certain tasks by the pupils without the use of explicit instruction. Such a system was deployed in order to “place the bodies in a little world of signals to each of which is attached a single, obligatory response....”<sup>26</sup> The purpose of such regimented discipline was to encourage the creation of docile bodies for whom the employment of particular learned stimuli would result in predictable and systemically advantageous individual responses.

The grocery store as experienced by the child is exactly one such “little world of signals.” Numerous studies cited in the American Psychological Association [APA] report have demonstrated that both product recollection and brand preference can be strongly imbued in children after viewing a single advertisement for a particular product. Importantly, numerous studies have also shown that the “purchase-influence” exerted by children over their parents has a “relatively high degree of success,” particularly in the United States.<sup>27</sup> A child in a supermarket is the subject of a signal (specifically packaged brand display), that signal triggers both the memory of and a positive emotional response towards that particular product as a cognitive result of being subjected to advertising, and the child’s subsequent demand for the product results in the parent’s decision to purchase said product. Although it may seem that the effect of a signal-based response is negligible, it is important to note that “children age

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>27</sup> APA, *APA Task Force*, 11.

fourteen years old and under make \$24 billion in direct purchases and influence \$190 billion in family purchases...."<sup>28</sup> The financial benefit gained by companies with heavy advertising budgets as a result of child-influenced parent purchases are, therefore, a direct result of the formative cognitive effect such advertising has on children. If my original conceit that one of the most important functions assigned to individuals within a consumption-based economy is the rate at which they consume, then ubiquitous advertising can be seen as one of the "methods of correct training" by which a particular trait of bodily docility (signal-based consumption) is achieved in order to maximize individual efficiency (overall rate of consumption).

### **Conclusion: The Production of Constitutionally Consumptive Citizens**

Although signal-based consumption is one success of disciplinary power as exercised by advertising, it is not the only accomplishment of such a system, nor is it the only aspect of the system that can be described as "Foucauldian." Foucault very explicitly contends that power is productive. Power not merely censors, or says "no" to, certain behaviors or personal characteristics, but it also actively constructs desired characteristics and modes of behavior within subjected individuals. Joseph Rouse explains why disciplinary power as described by Foucault is more efficacious than alternative modes of power, stating that "other ways of exercising force can only coerce or destroy their target. Discipline and training can reconstruct it to produce new gestures, actions, habits and skills, and ultimately new kinds of people."<sup>29</sup> For example, by subjecting a schoolchild to comprehensive signal-based drills and creating an atmosphere of imperative obedience, the disciplinary power of Foucault's example not only creates a body which responds to certain signals in a specific way, it also constructs an individual for whom obedience is a primary value and the authority of her teachers an intellectually unquestioned fact. Thus, the payoff afforded to the normalizing tendencies of the disciplinary power does not end when the child is no longer in a classroom equipped with a signal bell. Rather, a new obedience-valuing, instruction-following, docile-bodied individual walks out of the schoolhouse at the end of her

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Rouse, "Power/Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98.



schooling and ideally remains one such well-behaved citizen for the rest of her life.

The APA report concludes that the ubiquity of advertising led children to “develop the mindset that ‘you are what you buy.’ Material possessions become the source of judgment by others as well as the source of one’s own self-evaluation.”<sup>30</sup> By instilling this sense of consumption-based identity formation in childhood, the disciplinary power of advertising ensures the creation of docile (consumptive) adult citizens. In this sense, youth-targeted advertising achieves two of the objectives attributed by Foucault to disciplinary power: predictable individual signal-based response and the internalization of an identity based largely on maximizing one’s individual utility as defined by an overarching social system. In this case, the maximized utility is consumption, and it has been designated as a primary mode of individual utility by the imperatives of consumption-based capitalism.

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<sup>30</sup> APA, *APA Task Force*, 11.

# Nietzsche and the Prince

## *Ian Ferguson*

**Abstract:** The main character of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* is a devout Orthodox Christian named Prince Myshkin. Friedrich Nietzsche, who is intensely critical of Christianity, and Myshkin share the same views on shame and pity despite their apparent ideological differences. They condemn the damaging effects of shame and praise the redeeming quality of pity for people who are put to shame. Nietzsche and Myshkin criticize the moral aspect of Christianity, but Nietzsche generalizes it for all of Christianity and Myshkin limits it to the Catholic Church. In the end, they both advocate a philosophy of love for humanity.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* is centered on a well-meaning, religious prince named Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin.<sup>1</sup> This essay will show that the Christian prince Myshkin and the anti-Christian Friedrich Nietzsche share the same views on shame and pity, which should be the two emotions they disagree on most. To do this, Nietzsche's conceptions of shame and pity are explained and compared to Myshkin's interaction with the fallen girl, Marie. The parallels between the ideology of Nietzsche and the actions of the prince could raise the objection that Myshkin is not actually a Christian. This is rejected by Myshkin's condemnation of Catholicism as a distortion of Christianity, which embodies Nietzsche's attacks on Christianity in general.

Nietzsche's concept of shame is complex as it is the result of morality exercised in custom. Therefore, it is necessary to understand Nietzsche's conceptions of morality and custom that produce shame. Morality is a dichotomy of "good" versus "evil" that commands how people should act. The evolution of this morality, specifically Christian morality, is important to understanding how it affects custom and shame. Nietzsche contends that those people who had power over the lower orders made the first value judgments. These "masters" were the first to create the contrast between "good" and "bad." Nietzsche writes that this contrast arose from "the continuing and predominant feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Henry and Olga Carlisle (New York: Signet Classics, 2010).



those ‘below.’”<sup>2</sup> The masters believed that their position of power was “good” and that the lesser people who composed Nietzsche’s “slave” group and their servile actions were “bad.” The move from the “master morality” to the modern “slave morality” occurred when the slaves became more clever than the masters. Nietzsche writes that “the beginning of the slaves’ revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, being denied the proper response of action, compensate for it with imaginary revenge.”<sup>3</sup> *Ressentiment* is Nietzsche’s term for the anger and hatred that the slaves had for the masters; it is a specific negative emotion that is directed at the masters for putting the slaves in their subservient position. The revolt of the slaves against the rule of the masters did not take place physically but was an intellectual revolution against the masters. The substantial power of the masters ensured the failure of a physical rebellion by the slaves, so they exercised their creativity to create a new morality that would subvert the ideology of the masters that was based on their resentment of the masters’ power. As a result, the new value system despised what the masters had previously prized: namely power, self-gratification, and “saying ‘yes.’”<sup>4</sup> The new slave morality created the dichotomy of “good versus evil,” rather than the master dichotomy of “good versus bad.” Nietzsche wants to stress that the master morality was created out of a positive view of the way they lived, while the slave morality was the result of resentment of the masters and their way of life. Nietzsche summarizes the relationship neatly: “The ‘well-born’ *felt* they were ‘the happy’; they did not need first of all to construct their happiness artificially by looking at their enemies.”<sup>5</sup> The new slave morality was inferior to the master morality by virtue of its creative drive, which was negative and created out of the opposite of master morality. This opposite, the good of slave morality, is counter to human instinct. Consequently, it created a “bad conscience” in humans.

This bad conscience is the internalization and regulation of human instinct and resultant self-punishment as a way to function within society.<sup>6</sup> Outside of the individual, customs “are the

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic,” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 396.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

*traditional* way of behaving and evaluating.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, customs and traditions are the practice of morality. If a person were to break custom, “punishment for breaches of custom [would] fall before all on the community.”<sup>8</sup> The feeling that has been entrenched in humans when they break with custom, or indulge human instinct, is shame. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra spoke thusly of shame in a hypocritical follower of slave morality: “Your spirit has been persuaded to contempt of the earthly, but your entrails have not: *these*, however, are the strongest part of you! And now your spirit is ashamed that it must do the will of your entrails and follows by-ways and lying-ways to avoid its own shame.”<sup>9</sup> Here Nietzsche clarifies that slave morality condemns what human instincts strive for, and the follower of this morality, who delights in this “honesty,”<sup>10</sup> is inherently dishonest about one’s own nature. This dishonesty hides one’s instinctual desires in order to avoid the shame that one would suffer both internally and socially if one were to pursue one’s will to power in a way that involved dishonesty.

With shame understood in a moral and customary sense, Nietzsche explains how it should be dealt with in three aphorisms in the third book of *The Gay Science*.<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche writes, “*Whom do you call bad?* – Those who always want to put to shame. *What do you consider most humane?* – To spare someone shame. *What is the seal of liberation?* – No longer being ashamed in front of oneself.”<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche claims in the second aphorism that it is the height of humanity to spare someone shame. This establishes that shame is one of the most painful experiences, for to show humanity is to spare someone pain. Going back to the first aphorism in this context, calling people who put others to shame bad is a condemnation of people who inflict pain on others. Nietzsche writes that “only something that continues *to hurt* stays in the memory.”<sup>13</sup> The pain of shame is not a temporary feeling; it lasts in the mind of the person who was shamed. In fact, the agony can be so great and lasting that if the person does what is deemed shameful while one is alone, the pain of shame will still be felt, even though there is no one there to

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 191.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 272.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 226.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morality,” 410.



condemn him or her. This leads to the third aphorism, which states that the “seal of liberation” is no longer being ashamed in front of oneself. This is the liberation from the causes of shame, from the customs and traditions that function to keep the moral structure of the society together. As Nietzsche remarks in “Daybreak,” “The free human being is immoral because in all things he is *determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a tradition.”<sup>14</sup> This self-dependence protects someone from the agony of shame. According to Nietzsche, then, the ideal human is one who does not inflict shame on another and who is not ashamed of oneself. In fact, this ideal human would try to alleviate the shame felt by others that was inflicted by society.

Nietzsche is also known for his vitriolic view of pity. He openly despises it, going so far as to call it both the deepest abyss<sup>15</sup> and one of the greatest dangers.<sup>16</sup> However, Nietzsche also writes of pity as beneficial when properly understood. In effect, he has two separate kinds of pity: one that is attached to slave morality and negative, and another that is freethinking and positive. To fully understand Nietzsche’s views on pity, it is vital to look at both of his conceptions of it.

The negative variation of pity is deeply rooted in Nietzsche’s slave morality. Christianity, the embodiment of slave morality and the target of many of his abuses, teaches this thoughtless variation of pity. The clearest example of Nietzsche’s thoughts on the pity that Christianity advocates is found in his aptly named work “The Anti-Christ: Curse on Christianity.” The first thing that Nietzsche explains about the nature of pity is that it is depressing. He writes, “Pity stands in antithesis to the tonic emotions which enhance the energy of the feeling of life: it has a depressive effect.”<sup>17</sup> Feeling pity for another human being is saddening for both the person being pitied, as it preserves his or her weak position, and the person who pities, as he or she takes on the suffering of the pitied. This pity does not attempt to improve life and dwells on the suffering and negative aspects of life; it is nihilistic, according to Nietzsche. It seeks to abolish all suffering in life, but this is dangerous. Through suffering, humans can achieve great things and improve their overall quality

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<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, “Daybreak,” 191.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 278.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” 226.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ: Curse on Christianity,” in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 488.



of life; it is the force behind progress.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche concludes that "this depressive and contagious instinct thwarts those instincts bent on preserving and enhancing the value of life: both as a *multiplier* of misery and a *conservator* of everything miserable."<sup>19</sup> To Nietzsche, there are no benefits to this kind of pity; it weakens all who take part in it.

However, there is a form of pity that Nietzsche approves. He differentiates his pity from the Christian perception of pity by first saying what his pity is not. Nietzsche writes, "It is not pity for social 'misery,' for 'society' and its sick and injured, for the perennially depraved and downtrodden who lie around us everywhere; even less is it pity for the grumbling, oppressed, rebellious ranks of slaves who are looking to be masters."<sup>20</sup> Here Nietzsche states that his new pity is not for the typically pitiful. He even appears to have contempt for the lower classes who complain of their position. What then is his pity? He writes that "our pity is a more elevated, more far-sighted pity – we see how human beings are being reduced, how all of you are reducing them!"<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche claims that the appropriate targets of pity are not the classically suffering but those people who suffer because of Christian morals. They who are put to shame, and the resultant lasting pain they are subjected to, are the ones whom Nietzsche thinks are worthy of or in need of pity. They should be pitied because they suffer needlessly; it is not beneficial, like the suffering that is condemned by Christianity, but it tears them down and incapacitates them. By being shown compassion, these people can recover their lives. The ideal, then, is to show pity for people who are put to shame. In this way, the results of the two pities are very different: the Christian pity results in sadness and a loss of the drive to improve, while Nietzsche's pity results in happiness and improvement in the life of the pitied. With Nietzsche's concept of pity explained, it is now necessary to examine the views of Prince Myshkin.

Prince Myshkin is an Orthodox Christian man who suffers from epilepsy and has a great capacity for kindness. Throughout *The Idiot*, Myshkin attempts to help people to improve their lives and alleviate their suffering. His nature in this regard is most clearly illustrated in his interaction with a girl named Marie, whom he

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future," in Pearson, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 348.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," 488.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," 347.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



met while in a Swiss village for treatment of his epilepsy. In the village, Marie lived with her old, sick mother and took care of her while doing menial labor for the other villagers. She was seduced by a French commercial traveler, left the village with him, and was then abandoned by him. She had to beg her way back to the village, and, when she returned, her mother and everyone in the village put her to shame. Marie continued to care for her dying mother, but her mother refused to speak to, clothe, or feed Marie. When her mother died shortly after, the pastor publicly shamed Marie at her mother's funeral, going so far as to say that her actions caused the death. Marie then went to take care of the cattle of a local cowherd as a means to get what little food she could. Throughout her ordeal, everyone in the village ridiculed Marie, especially the children who would throw stones and mud at her, and she kept her head down in great shame.<sup>22</sup> Myshkin said he "saw that she herself accepted it as perfectly right and proper and considered herself the lowest creature on earth."<sup>23</sup> Marie was overcome with shame.

Prince Myshkin saw what was happening to Marie and resolved to help her. He sold a diamond pin he had for a few francs and went out to give them to her. After he gave her the money, he recalled:

I kissed her and told her not to think I had any evil intentions, and that I kissed her not because I was in love with her but because I felt very sorry for her, and that from the very beginning I had not thought her guilty but only very unhappy. I wanted very much to comfort her then and to assure her that she should not consider herself beneath everyone, but she didn't seem to understand.<sup>24</sup>

Myshkin gradually began to talk to the children of the village who ferociously abused Marie, and eventually the children began to feel sorry for her. They brought her food and clothing, and, as they interacted with her, they began to love her. After the funeral of Marie's mother, the children were incensed by the pastor's condemnation of Marie, and some of them threw stones through the windows of his home. Marie was overjoyed every time the

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<sup>22</sup> Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 68-73.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

children came to visit her, and they too were happy when they saw her. However, she became consumptive during the time she was neglected. Her condition worsened, but, when she died, she died happy and with the love of Myshkin and the children. Even at the end she was pained by the guilt and shame of her actions, but she managed to have some happiness.

The treatment that Marie received is representative of the shame and ill treatment that Nietzsche condemned. She went off with the French traveler and broke with custom. By doing so, Marie was put to shame by the villagers. The deep inner pain they subjected her to would have brought her life to a faster end and in complete misery had the prince not had pity on her. Myshkin realized that Marie's suffering was unnecessary. He attempted to tell her that she was not guilty and that she should not be ashamed; the villagers, notably her mother and the pastor, were in the wrong. It is significant that the pastor and her mother, the two people who should have taken pity on her, were her greatest opponents. The power of custom and morality is so strong that they had completely forsaken her. While Myshkin could not liberate her from the feeling of personal shame, he gave her some happiness in the love expressed by the children. Myshkin lived up to the Nietzschean ideal of pity and shame by trying to remove the effects of shame on Marie and taking constructive, rather than destructive, pity on her.

Since Myshkin was a devout Christian, it appears suspect that he would follow the values espoused by Nietzsche in the way that he does, or that he is even Christian. The way in which he teaches the children to love Marie is antithetical to the Christian moral law that the villagers adhere to. The children even break the pastor's windows after he publicly shames Marie at her mother's funeral. After Marie's death, the schoolteacher, pastor, and the caretaker who looks over Myshkin all condemn him for corrupting the children.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the entire interaction that Myshkin had with the children in Switzerland is much like the metamorphoses of the spirit in Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" of the camel, lion, and child.<sup>26</sup> The prince starts as the camel weighed down by morality. As he sees the suffering of Marie and the harshness of the children who persecute her, he takes the form of the lion and does battle with the dragon of morality. The dragon in Myshkin's account is the populace of the village. He conquers the dragon by

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 263-264.



both showing pity on Marie and turning the children away from the moral system that oppressed her. Finally, the prince becomes the child in the way that he breaks from convention and is free from the shame and condemnation of others. In fact, his caretaker calls him a child, although derisively. Myshkin recounts, “He was entirely convinced I was a complete child myself, a real child, that is, and that only in my face and figure was I a grown-up person, but as for my development, my soul, my character, and perhaps even my intelligence, I was not an adult, and would never be one if I lived to be sixty.”<sup>27</sup> To Nietzsche, this insult would be a kind of complement for the innocent, creative, and life-affirming qualities attached to a child. Further, Myshkin tells a story about a drunken soldier who tried to dupe him into buying a tin cross, claiming that it was made of silver. He bought the cross and did not want to shame the man, although he knew that he would use the money to buy alcohol.<sup>28</sup> Myshkin did not even want to shame someone who was trying to peddle the cross itself. With his actions of teaching the children not to shame Marie and his own refusal to shame a drunkard attempting to cheat him, he is attacking Christian morality like in Zarathustra’s metamorphoses of spirit. Consequently, Myshkin does not appear as a Christian but as a Nietzschean.

Although he condemns some of the same things that Nietzsche condemns, Myshkin is a devout Christian. Myshkin does not attack Christianity in general, like Nietzsche, but concentrates his criticism towards the Catholic Church. He says that the Catholic Church “preaches a distorted Christ, a Christ it has calumniated and defamed, the opposite of Christ! It preaches the Antichrist.”<sup>29</sup> To Myshkin, Catholicism had subverted the essential Christian message in exchange for power. He continues, “The pope usurped the earth, an earthly throne, and took up the sword, and since then everything has been going on that way, except to the sword they have added craft, deceit, fanaticism, superstition, villainy.”<sup>30</sup> Myshkin is stating that Catholicism uses religion as a means to have temporal power, the completion of the dominance of slave morality and slaves. He maintains that the Catholic moral presence in Europe has caused the outpouring of nihilism, atheism, and socialism. The prince’s account of Catholicism is the source of much of the problems that he sees in Europe, much like Nietzsche’s Christianity.

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<sup>27</sup> Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 567.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Prince Myshkin and Nietzsche have similar positions. They portray a religion that is a tool for temporal power: Myshkin's Catholicism uses morality to maintain the Church itself, and Nietzsche's Christianity topples what is natural to humans to constrain the strong and preserve the weak. Myshkin and Nietzsche both argue that it is the morality of these religions that deceives and cows people into obedience. When someone breaks with the customs of the moral system, this person is shamed by the rest of the community. The two men also pursue the same remedy for dealing with such moral systems: take pity on those who are persecuted by these systems and raise them to their proper dignity as humans. As a result, they both have what is essentially a message of love. This message seeks to eliminate the unnecessary and painful experience of shame. What they condemn is a temporal power structure that desires strict conformity through the use of shame. Nietzsche's attack on Christianity that is taken up by Myshkin is how they attempt to abolish what Myshkin refers to as "the Antichrist." In this way, Christianity and Nietzsche's philosophy are united in their love for humanity.

The difference between the two men is the drive behind the same remedy. Prince Myshkin thinks that there is a spiritual component among all humans that yearns for God. The Catholic Church commandeered the spirituality of the European people for its own gain. Nietzsche, however, thinks that the spirituality of the people was a clever trick by slaves to remove power from the masters. He thinks that the creative power of individuals is supreme.

In conclusion, the views of Nietzsche and the prince, which on the surface would be in conflict as anti-Christian and Christian, are actually quite similar. They both share the same views about the damaging effects of shame and the redeeming quality of pity for people who are put to shame. Nietzsche and Myshkin both criticize the moral aspect of Christianity, but Nietzsche generalizes it for all of Christianity and the prince limits it to the Catholic Church. Regardless of their differences of ideology, both men desire to help people who suffer from the moral judgments of others and to advocate a philosophy of love for humanity.





# There Are No Genuine Disagreements about Funniness

*Eric Badovinatz*

**Abstract:** I argue that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. My argument rests largely on the premise that something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny. The bulk of this paper is spent supporting this premise, primarily through an analysis of the meaning of “funniness.” The rest of the paper is spent demonstrating how my conclusion follows from this premise.

## Introduction

Funniness is a funny thing. At times, it seems to be relative; a joke that makes me laugh out loud might make you cringe, or vice versa. In everyday speech, “So-and-so’ is funny,” is often seemingly interchangeable with, “I find ‘so-and-so’ funny.” Nevertheless, we frequently also treat funniness as though it is an objective matter—an inherent trait of those things that make us laugh. It is very common for two people to argue over whether something *is* funny and not just whether one or the other finds it funny. But can we actually have a genuine disagreement about something that intuitively seems so tied to personal experience?

I argue that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. By “genuine disagreement” I mean a disagreement between two or more people about the funniness of exactly the same thing. As an illustration, if Person A says, “X is funny,” and Person B says, “X is not funny,” then A and B are in a genuine disagreement only if X refers to the exact same thing in both statements. If X does not refer to exactly the same thing, then there is no genuine disagreement; A and B might be said to be merely “talking past” each other, using the same words to refer to different things.<sup>1</sup> My argument rests on the idea that we simply cannot experience exactly the same thing and that therefore we cannot experience the same funniness. My argument will be structured as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> A “non-genuine” disagreement might be described as the situation in which two or more people superficially appear to disagree about something but in fact do not hold conflicting viewpoints. As it will turn out, my argument will demonstrate that all apparent disagreements about whether something is funny are non-genuine in this sense.



1. Something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny.
2. More than one person cannot have exactly the same experience.
3. More than one person cannot have the same experience of something as funny.
4. If (3), then there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny.
5. There are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny.

In this paper, I focus on the strengths of the first premise by considering a contrasting “causal capacities” approach that I think is an inadequate account of funniness. I then reason through the rest of the argument and conclude that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. Finally, I examine one relativistic account that seeks to provide “faultless disagreement,” showing how it supports my conclusion that there are no genuine disagreements while illustrating how my account can be reconciled with our intuitions about disagreement.

### **Something Is Funny Only if Someone Experiences It as Funny**

Theories of humor generally strive to explain what it is that makes something funny, but “funniness” is a difficult word to define.<sup>2</sup> Much of the difficulty that arises in trying to formulate an adequate account of what is funny is a result of the ambiguity of the term. To flesh out the ambiguity and to provide a full account of what funniness is, we ought to distinguish between different possible meanings of the term “funniness.” I distinguish between three types of funniness:

- Funniness as a quality,  $F_q$ , is something in the external world that is outside of all cognitive experience. It is “funniness” that is inherent in something. In other words, something can possess  $F_q$  even if no one experiences that thing.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of widely-discussed types of theories of humor are superiority theories, incongruity theories, relief theories, and ambivalence theories. For a review of the subject, see D. H. Monro, “Theories of Humor,” in *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, eds. Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen, (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company, 1988), 349-55.



- Funniness as experience,  $F_e$ , is an experience we have (some sort of amusement or other "funniness" response) that we say is caused by "funniness"  $F_d$ .
- Funniness as a description,  $F_d$ , is an ascribed quality that we assign to that which we think is the cause of  $F_e$ .

I contend that there is no  $F_q$  and that this sense of "funniness" can be reduced to  $F_d$ .

It is important to make this distinction between  $F_q$  and  $F_d$  because it reflects different ways in which we talk about "funniness" in ordinary speech. Sometimes, "So-and-so' is funny," is interpreted as, "So-and-so' is (inherently) funny." Other times it is interpreted as something closer to, "I think 'so-and-so' is funny (because it amuses me)." The former is captured in the sense of  $F_q$  if we are talking about the extra-sensory world, and it is captured by the sense of  $F_d$  if we limit ourselves to only talking about our direct experience. However, only  $F_d$  captures the latter sense.

In our everyday discourse, we may often talk about  $F_q$  and  $F_d$  as if they are the same thing, but they are distinct in that  $F_q$  is outside of experience and  $F_d$  is in experience. In common usage, when something makes me laugh, I ascribe "funniness" to that thing, but that does not mean that that thing has some inherent funniness outside of my perception of it. What I am actually doing is ascribing "funniness" to an object within my experience.  $F_d$  belongs to my perception of that thing, not the thing in itself.  $F_d$  is not necessarily a conscious ascription, but it is necessarily tied to experience. You cannot have  $F_d$  without  $F_e$ , and vice versa, because you have  $F_d$  by virtue of your having a "funniness" experience towards it, and you have  $F_e$  by virtue of its being caused by some "funniness" in your experience, namely  $F_d$ .

For this reason,  $F_d$  appears closer than  $F_q$  to what we normally mean by "funniness." It captures both the idea that funniness can exist in a thing and the idea that funniness is experiential. But, in the case of  $F_d$ , "funniness" does not exist in an object outside our experience but in an object *of* experience. In fact, this feature of  $F_d$  provides further reason to accept  $F_d$  over  $F_q$ , since we only ever ascribe "funniness" to things we experience, anyway. We simply do not ascribe funniness to that which we do not experience. Thus, the best analysis of funniness seems to be that something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny.



This does raise the question of what it is that causes  $F_d$ . While we maintain that  $F_d$  is the cause of  $F_e$ , one may ask if there is something outside of our direct experience which causes us to perceive  $F_d$ . The most intuitive candidate for such a cause seems to be  $F_q$ . So, it is at least intuitively plausible that the ultimate cause of  $F_e$  is  $F_q$ . Such an analysis is tempting because it more directly reflects the way in which we talk about “inherent” funniness, i.e. when we say that *that thing* is funny.

However, in addition to my positive argument for dismissing  $F_q$ , there are some further problematic commitments that arise from accepting  $F_q$ . One problem with such an account is that we have no way of ascertaining whether the connection between  $F_q$  and  $F_e$  actually exists, since  $F_q$  by stipulation lies outside our experience. We cannot experience directly what is external to our experience, and thus we cannot know whether something outside of our experience is funny. Furthermore, if we cannot know directly that  $F_q$  is funny, and, since funniness is so tied to our experiential response to it, then it seems that  $F_q$  is not even what we mean by “funniness.” Instead, what we mean  $F_q$  is something closer to  $F_d$ , since  $F_d$  better captures the seemingly inherent yet subjective nature of funniness. Funniness seems to be necessarily tied to our experience in this way.

Of course, this is at best an incomplete response to the alternative analysis; the fact that something is external to experience by no means proves that it does not exist. Determining that we cannot know that something outside experience is funny does not necessarily imply that it in fact is not funny. We can draw a parallel with the phenomenon of visual perception. Consider as a parallel to  $F_q$  the greenness of an apple as a physical quality. One’s perception of greenness as a sensory quality (parallel to  $F_e$ ) is considered to be causally related to the physical quality of the apple, even though the physical quality of the apple is not directly experienced. Most people have no problem accepting that there is such a thing as greenness as a physical quality—and that it is causally connected to greenness as a sensory quality. So, if these phenomena truly are parallel, what is wrong with postulating a causal connection between some quality  $F_q$  and our experience  $F_e$ ? The problem, again, is that it simply makes no sense to talk about funniness as something that exists independently of experience, and the same applies to the greenness of the apple. While we can accept that some quality external to our experience is the cause of our experience, this does not mean that the external quality resembles our experience. It is strange to talk about comparing the physical quality that causes a perception of

greenness to the perception of greenness itself because the two things are of different kinds. We would not say that the physical quality of the apple is the same sort of thing as the experiential perception of greenness, even if the two are closely related. Similarly,  $F_d$  is necessarily a different kind of thing than the thing in the external world that causes us to perceive  $F_d$ . And an extra-experiential thing that causes  $F_d$  would not be something we would truly want to call “funniness” because, as we have maintained, the notion of “funniness” is necessarily tied to experience. Maintaining that there is such a thing as  $F_q$  would entail that something can be “funny” even if no one ever experiences it, which seems absurd given our analysis thus far. The concept of  $F_q$  is difficult—if not impossible—to comprehend because “funniness” is so closely tied to experience in our language.<sup>3</sup>

### Causal Capacities

In the previous section I mentioned that, although we do not consider things outside our experience to be funny, we nonetheless can admit that our “funniness” experiences are caused by things outside our experience. This admission may lead one to attempt another rescue of  $F_q$  by proposing that “funniness” lies in causal capacities. Karl Pfeifer offers such an account.<sup>4</sup> As Pfeifer understands, a causal capacity is a capability of producing certain effects under certain conditions. He offers visibility as an example: “To be visible is a causal capacity to produce certain kinds of effects (visual experiences) in certain kinds of creatures (those with visual organs) in certain kinds of circumstances (appropriate lighting, etc.).”<sup>5</sup> To say that some object is visible, then, is to say that the object causes the viewer to have a certain sort of visual experience when one views the object in some set of standard conditions.

Funniness, Pfeifer thinks, can be explained in a similar way. On his account, to say that something is funny is to say that anyone satisfying certain conditions in relation to that thing would find it funny. Whether something is funny is independent of our actual experience of that thing, yet dependent on our potential experience of it. So, something is inherently funny by virtue of its having the potential to cause a “funniness” experience. In this case, using my

<sup>3</sup> I am greatly indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the ideas in this paragraph.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Pfeifer, “Causal Capacities and the Inherently Funny,” *Conceptus* 27, no. 70 (1994): 149-159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.



terminology,  $F_q$  is defined by its potential to cause  $F_c$  under the right conditions. Thus, Pfeifer believes that something outside our experience can indeed be funny.

However, this account has two main problems. The first is what I mentioned in the previous section: it makes no sense to call something “funny” that lies outside experience. While Pfeifer perhaps provides a condition that will be met by most things that tend to cause people to have “funniness” experiences, this condition does not itself make something funny. Stemming from this is a second problem with the causal capacities account: it still allows us to have  $F_c$  that is not caused by Pfeifer’s  $F_q$ .  $F_q$  is said to always cause a “funniness” experience under the right conditions, but there is no reason to think that it is the only thing that ever causes “funniness” experiences. If “funniness” experiences are caused by extra-experiential things, then Pfeifer’s  $F_q$  is not even an exhaustive set of those things. He is committed to saying that someone can have a “funniness” experience without perceiving anything as funny, or perhaps as incorrectly perceiving something as funny. But this is problematic because, as I have established, people do generally ascribe a causal relation between  $F_d$  and  $F_c$ , and  $F_d$  by definition *is* funny. This provides further evidence that the best account of “funniness” is one that limits funniness to experience. Something is only funny if someone experiences it as funny, and all we experience as funny can be captured by the sense of  $F_d$ .

### **There Are No Genuine Disagreements about Whether Something Is Funny**

I will now sketch my argument for why there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. The first premise of this argument, as was discussed above, is that something is funny only if someone experiences it as funny. I have provided sufficient reason to believe this premise is true or have at least shown it to be the most plausible of the alternatives.

My second premise is that more than one person cannot have exactly the same experience. I think this is less contentious than the first premise, but it requires some elaboration. No two people can experience the exact same thing because an individual’s experience is essentially tied to that particular individual. While it is conceivable that two people could be made to have the same qualitative experience, I think it is fair to assume that under the normal circumstances of humor discourse this is not the case. All

that matters to my argument is that no two people involved in humor discourse have exactly the same experience. After all, if two people did somehow have the exact same experience, then they would be incapable of disagreeing with each other. With these caveats, I think this premise is uncontroversial.

It follows from these first two premises that more than one person cannot have the same experience of something as funny. Since something is funny by virtue of experience of that thing, and, because you and I have different experiences, the experiences and the funniness are distinct and unique to each of us. My  $F_d$  is necessarily different from your  $F_d$ , and my  $F_e$  is necessarily different from your  $F_e$ , even if these experiences have similar external causes. We both may think that a particular joke is funny, and we may even give the same reasons for thinking that it is funny; but really what I think is funny is my experience of the joke, and what you think is funny is your experience of the joke.

If more than one person cannot have the same experience of something as funny, then there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. Two people cannot disagree about the funniness of *exactly the same thing*. If you think the joke is funny and I think that it is not funny, then we are not actually in conflict. Your experience of the joke is that it is funny and mine is that it is unfunny. Similarly, if you think the joke is funny for one reason and I think it is funny for another, we are not in a genuine disagreement, despite having seemingly opposing views. If we were to actually have a verbal dispute on the issue, we would simply be "talking past" one another, each talking about something different, despite using the same terminology. And, if we do in fact specify that we are talking about the funniness of the joke independent of experience, then we are talking about something completely different. To talk about "funniness" as a cause of "funniness experiences" is a matter of equivocation. As I have shown, something that is external to experience cannot be "funny" in the basic sense of the word.

A consequence of this conclusion is that there is also no genuine agreement about whether something is funny. That is because, when we think we disagree about whether something is funny, we tend to use the inherent-funniness speak where, "So-and-so' is funny," seems to mean, "So-and-so' *is* funny." However, when we seem to be in agreement we use a sort of subjective speak where, "So-and-so' is funny," more accurately means, "I find 'so-and-so' to be funny." It is our intuitions about disagreement that are most in need of mending. In any event, the fact that we cannot



have genuine agreement about whether something is funny does not seem to be cause for alarm.

Still, the intuitions are tempting. Most accounts of disagreement in humor discourse seem to favor approaches that are able to reconcile our intuitions with the close tie between experience and funniness. Pfeifer's causal capacities account, for instance, implies that there is genuine disagreement about whether something is funny, and in fact that there is always potential for genuine disagreement. One may even attempt to give a relativist account of funniness that is similar to my own but that allows for disagreement. I shall consider one such account now and explain why it still does not lead to genuine disagreement. I will further explain how it can potentially be used to reconcile my account with our intuitions.

### Faultless Disagreement

Andy Egan provides what he calls a "*de se* version of a response-dependence account" that he thinks allows for disagreement about whether something is funny.<sup>6</sup> He believes funniness is a topic that allows for "faultless disagreement," where there is genuine disagreement about something yet no party is incorrect in the matter. When you say, "So-and-so' is funny," and I say, "So-and-so' is not funny," we are in fact disagreeing with each other, but both of us are also correct. The idea is that I cannot suddenly come to believe what you believe without undergoing some other changes in my experience.<sup>7</sup> He explains, "On a *de se*-ist view of thought about the comic, thinking something's funny is locating yourself in a certain chunk of a space of possible predicaments."<sup>8</sup> Egan offers this example:

When I believe [Steve Carell] is funny and you believe he's not, what I believe is incompatible with what you believe—nobody could believe both things. So there's a clear sense in which our beliefs are incompatible. Neither of us could believe what the other does without changing our minds.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Andy Egan, "There's Something Funny about Comedy: A Case Study in Faultless Disagreement," *Erkenntnis* 79, no. 1 (2014): 73–100.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Egan is correct in saying that our beliefs are incompatible, and in this way his account has great explanatory power when it comes to figuring out why it is that we seem to have genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. However, even on this account, we still only *seem* to have genuine disagreements. This incompatibility of experiences is not genuine disagreement.

Egan concedes this fact. He does not argue for genuine disagreement, which we have understood to mean disagreement about the funniness of exactly the same thing. Rather, he offers a series of possible forms of non-genuine disagreement that may arise as a result of the incompatibility of our beliefs. He is able to obtain "faultless disagreement" in this way by appealing to non-genuine disagreements, which are directly caused by the incompatibility of our beliefs and experiences of whether something is funny. However, this disagreement is not genuine disagreement in our sense, although it again provides good explanations for what we do disagree about when it comes to funniness. Thus, Egan's faultless disagreement account reaches the same conclusion as my own: there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. More importantly, his account demonstrates that it is possible to reconcile my account with the intuition that we do in fact disagree with each other. Much like the nature of "funniness," our concept of "disagreement" has many possible meanings that fall short of full-fledged genuine disagreement. It is possible to construct an account that properly analyzes the concept of disagreement while staying in line with our intuitions.

## Conclusion

While it is difficult to assess accounts of "funniness" due to the ambiguity of the term itself, I have provided sufficient reason to conclude that there are no genuine disagreements about whether something is funny. The topic still needs to be explored in much more depth before we can make especially strong conclusions about the nature of humor, but my account is compatible with any broad theory of humor, and thus it can lead to further development of such theories.







# Defending a Benefit-Based Approach to Compensation for Necessary Losses

*Brandon Ferrick*

**Abstract:** This paper examines cases when compensation follows from necessary actions that cause harm. I posit that we can determine when compensation is due in instances of necessity by referring to the distribution of benefits and losses that result from the action.

Jerry Garcia once said, “Constantly choosing the lesser of two evils is still choosing evil.”<sup>1</sup> I am inclined to disagree. Although the choice will ultimately end up with evil or harm in some form, we often praise individuals who take the path that leads to fewer negative consequences. All things being equal, we would much rather save one hundred lives at the expense of one than save one life at the expense of one hundred. In instances where harm is unavoidable, we strive for the least amount of damage possible. This is one of the rationales behind the necessity defense in the civil and criminal law. When one finds oneself in a scenario where harm is unavoidable and the only option is to break the law or suffer greater harm, the law privileges deviations so long as a person is acting as a reasonable person. Such disutility avoiding actions are referred to as “necessary” actions. When we must take them we often also strive to undo any unfair losses or gains, to “make the victim whole.” We turn towards a principle of restitution: going from preserving utility to promoting equity and fairness by annulling unfair benefits and burdens. In this paper, I defend a benefit-based approach to compensation in instances of necessity. I will propose my conditions for compensation, argue against a rights-based approach to compensation, and then defend my thesis against four objections: (1) cases where the greater good is not achieved, (2) cases where the greater good is achieved, yet the person who achieves it acts impermissibly, (3) cases where someone does the wrong thing for the right reasons, and (4) cases where a person does the right thing for the wrong reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> “Jerry Garcia Quote,” BrainyQuote, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jerrygarc158230.html>.



## Rights-Based Approach vs. Benefit-Based Approach

I believe that one is liable to compensate for causing harm in necessity scenarios. The fulfillments of the following two conditions are necessary and sufficient for liability to compensate: (1) one retains an unfair benefit at the expense of another and (2) but for an unavoidable set of circumstances the beneficiary would not have been part of the causal chain of events that produced the unfair gain and loss. For example, had my friend Dave not been in insulin shock, I would not have needed to steal your insulin pen.

I posit three conditions that are necessary and jointly sufficient for one to deserve compensation for a harm one has suffered: (1) the victim suffered a loss, (2) the loss was unfair or unjust for the victim, and (3) the victim is not responsible for the circumstances that generated the need for the loss. In (2), it is not that the victim *believes* that he or she has lost unfairly or unjustly to satisfy this condition; rather, it is the fact that he or she has suffered the loss unfairly or unjustly. In virtue of the loss that the victim suffered (once the above criteria are met), the victim can be said to be *wronged* by the action and thereby is deserving of compensation.

In contrast to the above benefit-based approach, Judith Thomson adopts a rights-based approach to compensation. She looks for when rights have been infringed or violated as indicators of when a victim is wronged and compensation is due. She offers the following example: You are rich and own a lot of steak.<sup>2</sup> You keep this steak in a locked freezer on your back porch. Proximate is a child with a protein deficiency who will die if I do not get the child some protein fast. I have no protein at the moment, but you do. You are out of town, and I am unable to contact you. The only way to get the steak is to break into your freezer and take one. Thomson then proposes that you have been wronged by my infringing on your right not to have your steak stolen. Since you have been wronged, you qualify for a claim to compensation for your loss.

From whom should you receive compensation? This is where Thomson's theory runs thin. She proposes that I am the one who ought to compensate you for the loss because I am the one who stole the steak. This is problematic, however. In necessity cases such as the one that Thomson proposes, the action that I take is *justified*. It is justified in virtue of promoting the greater good and preventing a

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Rights, Restitution, and Risk: Essays in Moral Theory*, ed. William Pareni, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986).

greater harm. Since the action is justified, it is no longer *wrongful*. In fact, my actions may even be applauded—I saved a life at the mere expense of a steak. Since my actions are justified and thereby not wrongful, I cannot be said to have *wronged* anyone. The issue here is that, even though I did not act wrongfully, you have still been *wronged* by my action.

This issue can be resolved by appealing to the notion that you are wronged by the circumstance and therefore not by me. Because you are wronged by the circumstance, you can claim compensation from neither the starving child nor me because we were not the ones to wrong you. Yet, we want to compensate you for your loss; it is easy to say that you are *owed* something for your loss, and surely we *want* you to have that loss annulled. This incoherence—a compensation owed but no one owing it—is what makes the rights-based approach problematic. A benefit-based approach is better.

If we take a benefit-based approach to compensation, you can recover for the loss of your steak. What we need to do first is look for an unfair gain. We find the unfair gain being retained by the starving child: the child received your steak where you unfairly lost it. I did not benefit from this transaction. In fact, I am acting as a Good Samaritan by saving the child’s life. We want to promote my kind of actions for social benefit and cohesion. If we had the Good Samaritan compensate you for your loss, we would end up with a deterring effect and a decline in Good Samaritan actions because of the looming fear of needing to compensate for my otherwise illicit actions.

In this scenario, the child is the one who ought to be held liable to compensate for the loss of your steak. The child meets all the requirements for being liable to compensate for harm. The child meets (1) in that the child retained an unfair benefit at the expense of another, namely the steak. The child also meets (2) in that the child stands in relation to the causal chain of events that led to the harm. This condition is satisfied in virtue of having the protein deficiency and requiring the steak, facilitating the actions that then followed by me.

## Worries and Hard Cases

Let us test my theory further against potential worries. First, what happens when a greater good is not achieved? Consider the case



of *Vincent v. Lake Erie*.<sup>3</sup> In this case, a large and valuable ship, owned by Lake Erie Transport Co., was about to be caught in an imminent storm that would have destroyed it. The personnel on the ship decided to dock it at a private dock in order to save it. As the storm passed, the boat remained unscathed, but the dock suffered damage. The dock owner then sued the shipping company for damages to the dock. The courts found that the action taken by the boating company was justified, but the boating company had to compensate because their motivations were not to produce the greater good altruistically but were self-serving.<sup>4</sup> Suppose, hypothetically, that there were a third-party bystander who saw the boat stranded in the middle of the lake, towed the boat to the dock, secured it to the dock, and left it there. In this fact pattern, concurring with my proposed theory, the boat owner (the beneficiary) would be liable to pay compensation for the damage to the dock, which would be consistent with the original ruling that the boat owner had retained a benefit, justifying that the boat owner pay the cost of compensation.

If we change the fact pattern slightly and say that the boat was not saved but rather that it sank, even though it was secured to the dock, would that change the outcome of who is liable to compensate the dock owner? My answer is no: it does not change the outcome. My proposal for liability to compensation has two conditions: there must be (1) a retention of an unfair benefit at the expense of another, and (2) the beneficiary must stand in relation to the causal chain of events that led to the unfair gain and loss. Condition (2) means that the beneficiary must have been in a position where the unfair loss needed to occur in order for the beneficiary to benefit and promote the greater good. It is neither necessary nor sufficient that the production of the good actually obtains. As long as the motivations behind the action that caused the harm were directed towards producing a good (benefitting the beneficiary), the beneficiary is liable for the action. Whether the Lake Erie Transport Co. actually retains the benefit as a matter of fact is not important. What are important are the motivations and beliefs of the actor.

Second, what about cases where the greater good is achieved, yet the person who achieves it acts impermissibly? Consider Trolley scenarios.<sup>5</sup> In these scenarios, there is a trolley on a track that is rolling

<sup>3</sup> *Vincent v. Lake Erie Transportation Co.*, 109 Minn. 456, 124 N.W. 221 (Minn. 1910).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson and Sherwood J. B. Sugden. "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem," *Monist* 59, no. 2 (1976): 204-17.

down a hill out of control. In the direct path of the track, there are five innocent individuals. You are watching these events unfold. Next to you there is a lever that will divert the trolley to an alternate track. However, on this alternate track there is one innocent individual who will most certainly be killed if you divert the trolley onto the alternate track. All things being equal, the permissible action would be to pull the lever and save the five lives of the individuals.

When all things are not equal, however, the scales may tip. What if the one person on the alternative track has the cure for all biological diseases and illnesses that afflict humanity? In this case, we may reconsider and decide that the life of the one individual is more valuable than those of the five innocent people because saving the one produces the greater good. Those who are stern about saving the five people regardless of the credentials or qualifications of the one find it impermissible to pull the lever. If this stern view is granted, we have a scenario where the action is impermissible yet produces a greater good. I believe that it is actually impossible to have scenarios where a greater good is achieved and the person who achieved it acted impermissibly. What justifies the permissibility of the action to pull the lever is that it will produce the greater good. If I have an action that is impermissible, then it *cannot* be producing a greater good. Producing a greater good entails the action being permissible under these necessary circumstances.

Third, what about cases where someone does the wrong thing for the right reasons (or does more than is necessary for the right reasons)? If one acts impermissibly but was motivated to produce a greater good, one's actions would be permissible as long as the motivation for action conformed to the intention to produce a greater good. For example, if there were a raging fire that was coming to burn down the town and the only thing that I could do to stop the fire would be to burn down your crops, my actions would be permissible because they conformed to the motivation to produce a greater good. Furthermore, if I only needed to burn down two of your twenty acres of land to prevent the fire, yet I chose to burn down all twenty, the action would still be permissible. Producing the greater good is what is at stake, and, to be better safe than sorry, burning the rest of your field *to be certain* that the fire would cease is the *reasonable* action to take. However, under a different set of facts where the action was deemed to be *unreasonable*, I would be liable to compensate you for whatever unreasonable excess of loss you suffered. Actions are justified and permissible as long as they can pass a test of reasonableness. As long as



a reasonable person in the actor's situation would have done the same, the action is reasonable and thereby justified and permissible.

A potential objection to my account of this third worry is illustrated in cases where preventative actions are taken. For example, suppose I murdered someone to prevent him from blowing up the United States. It might seem that my theory commits me to applauding this action because it produces the greater good, making the murder permissible. That is far from true. The action would only be permissible if it were *necessary*. The action is only permissible if there are no ways to leave the scenario unscathed. If the facts were such that the man whom I killed had his hand on the button that would blow up the White House and he did in fact plan to do so, then surely my actions to kill him would be permissible. But, if he merely had the *potential* to blow up the White House and did not pose an immediate threat to others, the action of killing him would not be justified. I am not, here, discussing preventative measures that have the potential to produce a greater good. I am only concerned with matters of necessity.

Fourth, what about cases where a person does the right thing for the wrong reasons? These are cases where my motivations are not for the greater good, but the greater good is still brought about by my actions. Suppose that I want to stab Brina. I reach for something long and sharp in order to stab her, and what I grab is an epinephrine pen that I stole from your purse. Suppose, also, that at the same time that I went to stab Brina with the epinephrine, she had a severe and adverse allergic reaction to something in the air which required the rescue and service of an epinephrine pen. I then proceed to stab Brina in the chest, hoping to harm and kill her. Lo and behold, I save her life at the expense of the epinephrine pen.

In this scenario, I am liable to compensate you for the loss of your pen. One must act *for the right reasons* in order to be granted the preclusion from liability to compensate. One of the prongs of my theory involves one's motivations being for the greater good, not just acting and coincidentally happening to produce a greater good. The reason behind this rationale is that one's motivations to produce the greater good are what distinguish the actor as a Good Samaritan: one worthy of one's own actions being considered justified and permissible.

This consideration is in stark contrast to what Paul Robinson believes.<sup>6</sup> He finds that, as long as the greater good is brought about, the motivations behind the action are irrelevant. He posits that any justified act should never be punished, even if the actor produced the conditions requiring the otherwise illicit act.<sup>7</sup> His rationale for this conclusion is that we want to promote strivings for the greater good. Suppose Eric sees Tim get hit by a car and the only way for Eric to save Tim's life is for Eric to steal a nearby car and drive Tim to the hospital. Additionally, Eric knows and despises the owner of the car and has been itching to tamper with his belongings. According to Robinson, since Eric produced the greater good and saved Tim's life, Tim ought not to be held liable to compensate the owner of the car for the blood stains, which appears to be consistent with my conclusion. However, Robinson's conclusion is actually problematic because it allows for Eric to get away unscathed with a maliciously motivated action. Eric got away with what he wanted: he managed to harm the owner of the car. If we took Robinson's position, Eric would get away without owing *any* compensation, which is sneaky because Eric's motivations did not coincide with producing the greater good. Robinson's view is unacceptable because it promotes sneaky actions; it allows people to cause the harm they desire to cause and not have to worry about consequences for their actions.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a theory of liability and compensation based on an analysis of the distribution of benefits and burdens across actions that cause harm. When an unfair loss is sustained, the beneficiary of that loss ought to compensate whomever was harmed in order to make the victim whole again. I have also argued that Thomson's rights-based approach to compensation is incoherent because it generates people who are wronged even though no one has wronged them. By responding to criticisms I have also shown that (1) there is no actual requirement for the greater good to come to fruition for my theory to hold, (2) it is impossible to produce the greater good and act impermissibly, (3) actions that meet the reasonable person standard are not wrong, and (4) those who act with ill intentions are liable to provide compensation.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul H. Robinson, "A Theory of Justification: Societal Harm as a Prerequisite for Criminal Liability," *UCLA Law Review*, no. 23 (1975): 266-92.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, "A Theory of Justification," 267-68.







# Concreteness and Contraception: Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and the Affordable Care Act

*Katie Lane Kirkland*

**Abstract:** In this paper, I analyze Simone de Beauvoir's goals for women expressed in *The Second Sex* and compare these goals to the opportunities created by the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate. Though the contraceptive mandate advances Beauvoir's goal of concrete equality by supporting economic independence and recognizing women's sexual freedom, there are social and political limitations to these advancements.

In this paper, I argue that The Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate advances Simone de Beauvoir's goal of concrete equality because it creates real opportunities for women's self-determination by supporting economic independence and recognizing sexual freedom.

In her well-known book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir locates the socio-cultural causes of women's subjugation and prescribes actions for advancing women's emancipation.<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir focuses primarily on the economic and social barriers to women's liberty, especially regarding "concrete equality."<sup>2</sup> Beauvoir's concept of concrete liberty is contrasted with her concept of abstract or theoretical liberties. Beauvoir speaks of women's suffrage and the abandonment of the expected "wifely duty" of obedience as theoretical liberties, while she speaks of economic independence as a necessary condition for concrete equality.<sup>3</sup> For Beauvoir, political recognition alone is not sufficient for guaranteeing women's freedom. Beauvoir's goal for women is with "the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty."<sup>4</sup>

Beauvoir's rejection of happiness as the goal for women's situation is related to her adoption of the Hegelian concept of becoming. Beauvoir rejects happiness because "happiness consists in being at rest," and Beauvoir believes the proper role of the subject is active: "he [or she] achieves liberty only through a *continual reaching*

<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 679.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix.



*out toward other liberties*” (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Beauvoir asserts that, while many women are content with their dependent situations, they are being denied the opportunity to transcend themselves and their situations in the search for true being.

Beauvoir’s emphasis on becoming (as opposed to being) and liberty (as opposed to happiness) is at the core of her text and her concept of concreteness stems from these issues. For Beauvoir, woman is only free when she is “concretely equal” to man, and economic independence is a crucial factor of woman’s concrete liberty. Beauvoir denounces economic dependence because it allows a woman to accept the identity that her male supporter defines for her and it denies her the opportunity to create her own identity through meaningful subjective action and existence. Beauvoir advocates for economic independence because it releases women from the “feminine destiny” of financial dependence and marriage, and also because employment gives woman the opportunity to discover and define her own subjective meaning.

In her chapter on “The Independent Woman,” Beauvoir points to the actress as an example of the liberated woman because her work is meaningful to her and gives her an opportunity for self-fulfillment: “Their great advantage is that their professional successes...contribute to their sexual valuation; in their self-realization, their validation of themselves as human beings, they find self-fulfillment as women.”<sup>6</sup> For Beauvoir, what is most important is securing woman’s freedom to create herself and her own existential meaning. Only those opportunities that foster these goals are considered concrete.

The no cost-sharing coverage of contraception mandated by the Affordable Care Act [ACA] provides the concrete opportunity of economic independence by increasing women’s access to birth control in addition to helping women avoid the financial, social, and professional costs of unplanned pregnancy. Studies show that cost-sharing reduces the likelihood that Americans—particularly women—will use preventive health services.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a Health and Human Services Department report suggests that cost-sharing for preventive services such as mammograms, pap smears—and even contraception—represents an economic burden for women: “While

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

<sup>7</sup> “Affordable Care Act Rules on Expanding Access to Preventive Services for Women,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, last modified June 28, 2013, <http://www.hhs.gov/healthcare/facts/factsheets/2011/08/womensprevention08012011a.html>.

women are more likely to need preventive healthcare services, they often have less ability to pay. On average, they have lower incomes than men and a greater share of their income is consumed by out-of-pocket health costs.”<sup>8</sup>

Eliminating the out-of-pocket cost of birth control increases the likelihood that sexually active women will use it. Though the out-of-pocket cost of birth control has been a deterrent to women in the past, the cost of having and raising a child is dramatically higher—certainly enough to financially cripple an unprepared couple, let alone a single young woman.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the real economic opportunity created by the contraceptive mandate is the ability to avoid the potential financial devastation of an unplanned pregnancy. While the financial burdens of unplanned pregnancy are detrimental to a woman’s economic freedom, the risk of unplanned pregnancy and its economic costliness also presents an obstacle to her sexual freedom.

Beauvoir asserts that even economically independent women still are not concretely equal to men because they are unable to exercise their sexuality with the same degree of freedom. While women’s sexual freedom may sound like an obviously worthwhile goal, it is certainly worth closer examination to determine whether it truly creates a concrete opportunity for meaningful subjective action. Though Beauvoir does not explicitly justify her emphasis on sexual freedom, one could argue that it stems from her desire to liberate women from the social necessity of marriage. The value of women’s sexual freedom, however, goes beyond this freedom from marriage. Social expectations prevent women from making sexual advances, actions which are supposedly men’s territory. However, sexually liberated women have an opportunity to act as sexual subjects rather than being treated as men’s sexual objects. Though Beauvoir does not make this connection in order to show the concrete liberties created by sexual freedom, she does discuss the sexual inequalities created by social norms. Beauvoir focuses primarily on expected gender roles as they relate to the “feminine ideal,” an identity that women did not create or choose but one that they are expected to accept willingly.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> While the average cost of birth control is between \$5 and \$50 per month, the average out-of-pocket cost of giving birth in a hospital (with no complications) is around \$3,400. In addition to the cost of childbirth, the average yearly cost of raising a child is \$13,630. Cf. Elizabeth Rosenthal, “American Way of Birth, Costliest in the World,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/01/health/American-way-of-birth-costliest-in-the-world.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/01/health/American-way-of-birth-costliest-in-the-world.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) and “Expenditures on Children by Families, 2012,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, August 2013, iv.



Beauvoir is interested in a woman's ability to have sex free from the chains of marriage and pregnancy. Beauvoir would likely support the ACA's contraceptive mandate insofar as it creates concrete opportunities for women, particularly in the area of sexual liberation. The most obvious obstacle that would be removed by contraception is the risk of unwanted pregnancy: "however careful she may be, the woman is never wholly protected against the danger of conception."<sup>10</sup> Contraception was not easily available in Beauvoir's society, which is why she does not discuss it extensively in the text. "In England and America and some other countries a woman can at least decline maternity at will, thanks to contraceptive techniques. We have seen that in France she is often driven to painful and costly abortions."<sup>11</sup>

Though Beauvoir does not treat "the danger of conception" as the main obstacle to women's sexual freedom, safeguarding women from this danger is still important to Beauvoir's goal of concrete equality because she views motherhood, particularly unplanned motherhood, as a threat to a woman's professional success and therefore her economic independence: "having a child is enough to paralyze a woman's activity entirely."<sup>12</sup> The financial stresses of unplanned pregnancy are staggering, but the paralysis goes far beyond monetary issues. Beauvoir suggests that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a single woman to be a mother and have a successful career. Because of this dilemma, many feminist thinkers since Beauvoir have denounced motherhood as a major cause of women's social subordination.

In an article detailing feminist ideas about reproductive rights before and after the development of assisted reproductive technologies, Gerda Neyer and Laura Bernardi claim that, beginning with Beauvoir, many feminists have called for a total rejection of motherhood as the only means of eliminating discrimination: "the mainstream feminist discourse up to the mid-1980s took a critical approach to motherhood and regarded the rejection of motherhood as a prerequisite for overcoming women's subordination and for gaining equality."<sup>13</sup> Although it is true that Beauvoir argues that many women are restricted by society's definition of "the feminine destiny," which regards becoming a wife and mother as woman's proper goal, she does not advocate for a total rejection of motherhood as Neyer and Bernardi suggest.

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<sup>10</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 687.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 696.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 697.

<sup>13</sup> Gerda Neyer and Laura Bernardi, "Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction," *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 2 (2011): 164-65.

Even though Beauvoir does not ask all women to reject motherhood completely, she does acknowledge the fact that many anti-feminists have discriminated against women because of their reproductive capabilities. Shulamith Firestone picks up this thread, totally rejecting the notion of sexual difference.<sup>14</sup> Beauvoir's proposed solution to this issue is less radical than Firestone's. Beauvoir suggests that society must acknowledge a woman's right to refuse motherhood and must accept feminine sexuality divorced from the function of reproduction. Contraception is an important factor in recognizing a woman's right to control her own sexuality and reproductive abilities: "in England and America and some other countries *a woman can at least decline maternity at will*, thanks to contraceptive techniques" (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> Beyond preventing unwanted pregnancy, contraception represents a woman's control over her body and reproduction. A society that gives women access to birth control is a society in which lawmakers recognize a woman's sexuality apart from her reproductive functions. Therefore, not only does the contraceptive mandate of the ACA make birth control available to every woman, but it also represents acceptance of the fact that women can and do have sex without the intention of conceiving a child.

While it is clear that the contraceptive mandate of the ACA is based on recognition of the reality that women engage in sexual activity without the goal of reproduction, the law does not necessarily reflect all of public opinion. While the availability of contraception makes it biologically possible for women to have sex without conceiving, it does not guarantee that unmarried women can have sex without social repercussions. The resistance of several religious institutions represents a large and powerful part of American society that refuse to recognize women as sexual beings apart from their reproductive abilities. Even the language of the Institute of Medicine's report on recommended women's health services reflects the persistence of the idea that woman's destiny is to become a wife and mother: "[recommended services include] contraceptive education, counseling, methods, and services so that women can better avoid unwanted pregnancies and *space their pregnancies to promote optimal birth outcomes*" (emphasis

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<sup>14</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 696.



added).<sup>16</sup> This phrase is reminiscent of the Enlightenment ideal of Republican motherhood, where women were expected to express their patriotism by birthing and raising good American citizens. The assertion that contraception is important for “optimizing birth outcomes” suggests that, even though a woman has the right to decide *when* she bears children, reproduction is still regarded as one of a woman’s social responsibilities.

While the ACA’s contraceptive mandate secures women’s access to contraception and recognizes a woman’s right to control her own reproduction, these advances toward women’s sexual freedom do not achieve full sexual equality. Although the law recognizes woman’s freedom to exercise her sexuality without the goal of reproducing, American society as a whole still does not accept women’s sexuality, as demonstrated by the resistance to the contraceptive mandate. Even the wording of some of the government reports regarding women’s preventive health suggests a continuation of the belief that women have an obligation to reproduce.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, because of a lack of health literacy and access to healthcare, many women in impoverished communities may be unaware of the new opportunities created by the Affordable Care Act. These women are in a position to benefit greatly from the contraceptive mandate, though they may currently be least aware of these new services. Furthermore, because several states have refused to expand Medicaid, women in poor communities may not even have the opportunity to benefit from the services mandated by the Affordable Care Act.

Though these social factors present various obstacles to complete concrete equality, the increased availability of contraceptives mandated by the Affordable Care Act does in fact constitute a concrete opportunity for Beauvoir. While Beauvoir’s expressed goal for women in *The Second Sex* is concrete equality between men and women, Beauvoir does not suggest that this goal can ever be perfectly accomplished. In fact, one could argue that Beauvoir does not expect or intend for society to view equality as a definite, static, achievable goal because Beauvoir believes that each individual should constantly be working toward self-actualization and improvement. Although there is still work to be done to improve social attitudes and perceptions, the Affordable Care Act

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<sup>16</sup> Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, *Clinical Preventive Services for Women: Closing the Gaps*, (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

creates several concrete opportunities for women that did not exist previously, and, therefore, it should be seen as a significant advance in the direction of concrete equality.







# Duality Unresolved and Darwinian Dilemmas

## *Anson Tullis*

**Abstract:** By using Sharon Street’s Darwinian Dilemma, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer attempt to show that Sidgwick’s duality of practical reason, whereby an agent has equal reason to act in their own interests or act impartially for the benefit of all, is not actually a duality; rather, reasons for action are solely impartial due to the unreliability of intuitions favoring self-interested behavior. I argue that Lazari-Radek and Singer fail to accomplish their goal. I argue that Singer has previously provided an account of impartiality that makes it just as unreliable on the same grounds as self-interested tendencies. Sidgwick’s duality remains unresolved.

In this paper, I argue that Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer’s attempt to discredit rational self-interest while defending utilitarianism fails.<sup>1</sup> The authors set out to reanalyze Henry Sidgwick’s duality of practical reason in light of Sharon Street’s Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realists.<sup>2</sup> The authors’ conclusion is that, due to the obvious evolutionary explanation for self-interested behavior, intuitions for rational self-interest are unreliable. They then argue that impartiality, the rational basis of utilitarianism, has no evolutionary explanation that can cast intuitions for utilitarianism into doubt and that these intuitions are reliable.

In part one, I provide a brief outline of the general evolutionary debunking argument. I then outline Street’s Darwinian Dilemma in particular, and I finish with Lazari-Radek and Singer’s strategy in “The Objectivity.” In part two, I review the claims Peter Singer makes about the origins of impartial reasoning and moral development in his book *The Expanding Circle* [TEC].<sup>3</sup> In part three, I argue that the account in *TEC* contradicts the claims in “The Objectivity,” and parity of reasoning provides as much reason to be skeptical of the principle of utilitarianism as for rational self-interest. Sidgwick’s duality remains a duality. Lastly, I make suggestions for future use of debunking arguments, hopefully limiting certain unwieldy uses.

<sup>1</sup> Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, “The Objectivity of Ethics,” *Ethics* 123, no. 1 (2012): 9–31.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 127 (2006): 109–166.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).



## Establishing the Foundation

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer highlight the seemingly intractable conflict of Sidgwick's duality by saying this:

In searching for rational axioms that would give us guidance about what we ought to do, Sidgwick arrived at two that are, at least potentially, in conflict. The axiom of rational egoism says that each of us ought to aim at her or his own good on the whole, and the axiom of benevolence or utilitarianism tells us to aim at the good of all.<sup>4</sup>

Lazari-Radek and Singer go on to point out that Sidgwick's dilemma has not been resolved. They quote Derek Parfit:

...when one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or for those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient reasons to act in either of these ways....<sup>5</sup>

Although it is admitted that sometimes acting impartially entails acting in our own interests, there are inevitably circumstances whereby setting out to pursue our own ends and acting impartially, for the benefit of all, will result in conflict. By resolving Sidgwick's dilemma, it is hoped that the apparent inconsistency of our normative tendencies can also be resolved.

Lazari-Radek and Singer attempt to resolve the duality by testing Sidgwick's principle of rational self-interest and principle of utilitarianism against Sharon Street's Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realists.<sup>6</sup> Street's dilemma is a version of the evolutionary debunking argument and is explicitly posed against the meta-ethical position of moral realism, specifically the sort characterized by the position of stance independence: "the defining claim of realism... [is] that there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold

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<sup>4</sup> Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma," 109-166.

independently of all our evaluative attitudes."<sup>7</sup> Non-cognitivist and constructivist meta-ethical positions as well as some "realists" who do not adopt the rigorous position of stance independence are expressly left out of the clutches of Street's dilemma. Street's dilemma is directed at a very specific meta-ethical theory and many meta-ethicists who claim some degree of objectivity in their models but who reject stance independence will not feel the effect of Street's conclusions.

In general, debunking arguments attempt to show that, if some moral belief is held to be true because of an intuition that is formed by a non-truth tracking process, then the belief itself is unjustified. If the belief is formed and held due to cultural, historical, or evolutionary influences that have nothing to do with recognizing actual truth, then we are unjustified in our belief. It is essential to notice that debunking arguments do not test for the truth of a belief; they only test whether one is justified in holding the belief. At most, debunking arguments can show that a belief is unjustifiably held. Should some belief withstand debunking, this provides no positive justification or reason to think the belief corresponds with truth. The effects of debunking are only directly negative.<sup>8</sup>

If one were to ask an average first-century Roman citizen whether she believes that executing prisoners via gladiatorial combat is permissible, she may respond that she does in fact have that belief. Because her belief was formed due to an intuition that itself was very likely caused by the historical and cultural conditions she found herself in, and since the development of Roman culture was not a truth tracking process with respect to stance-independent moral realism, her belief is unjustified. The contrast between our culture and first-century Roman culture is stark, but it should not be difficult to see that Roman influence has very likely affected the beliefs of the Roman citizen in ways that have nothing to do with a realist moral truth. However, a couple of details could change things for the debunker. If this Roman citizen had put careful thought into the ethics of capital punishment, then the cause of her belief may be more than cultural. In such a case, the cultural debunking argument would be insufficient to fully debunk her belief. A debunker needs to show that these other reasons are insufficient to justify her belief as well. In either case, however,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-112. Cf. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13-18.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Kahane, "Evolution and Impartiality," *Ethics* 124, no. 2 (2014): 327-341 and "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments," *Nous* 45, no. 1 (2011): 103-125.



debunking the justification of belief holding does not demonstrate that execution by combat is *truly* wrong or permissible.

The evolutionary form of the debunking argument is a specific form of the more general debunking argument, and, rather than identify the more proximal causes of our beliefs as in historical or cultural debunking arguments, the evolutionary form probes the more distal origins of our moral intuitions and beliefs. Street's dilemma begins with the assumption, accepted by Lazari-Radek and Singer, that "evolutionary forces have played a tremendous role in shaping the content of human evaluative attitudes."<sup>9</sup> This, Street claims, creates a challenge for meta-ethical realists in explaining moral truths and the impact of evolutionary forces on the evaluative content we do have. According to the best theories accessible to us, evolution functions via natural selection, whereby reproductive success from one generation to the next determines the characteristics of eventual generations. Reproductive success depends largely on the circumstances of life for an individual: in other words, the environment, broadly understood. Traits that provide a competitive edge in reproduction, generation after generation, become more widely distributed in the population as time goes on, and traits that inhibit reproductive success, one way or another, tend to get weeded out of the population.

The tension of Street's dilemma resides in the space between moral truth and reproductive success. Unless the recognition of moral truth generation after generation improves the likelihood of reproductive success, it is highly unlikely that humans evolved a capacity or tendency to recognize a realist's stance-independent moral truth. Rather, it seems likely that at least many of our evaluative beliefs or intuitions were formed because they provided reproductive value in the circumstances in which early humans and their ancestors found themselves.

Street states that, considering the great influence evolutionary forces have had on shaping human values, realists can either assert or deny a significant relationship between the evaluative attitudes we do have and moral truth.<sup>10</sup> If we take Street's first horn and claim that there is no relationship between moral truth and our evaluative attitudes—that reproductive pressures did not incline us to intuit stance-independent truth—we must conclude that many or most of these attitudes are likely off-track, that we are unjustified in believing that our evaluative attitudes reflect truth. This is like trying to sail

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<sup>9</sup> Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma," 109.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

to Bermuda by relying merely on the winds and tides. Lacking any navigation equipment (our truth-tracking processes) it would be a bewildering coincidence if we actually arrived on Bermuda's beaches as opposed to any other place the wind could possibly blow us. If we claim there is a relationship, Street argues, we are making a substantive scientific claim that conflicts with modern scientific theories. As such, should one take the second horn, any theory of relationship would be subject to scientific scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> In taking the second horn, one moves from mere philosophy to speculative science.

Lazari-Radek and Singer subject the principle of rational self-interest and the principle of utilitarianism to Street's Dilemma individually. They argue that the principle of rational self-interest is a reasoned extension of egoism.<sup>12</sup> Egoism, they claim, has an obvious evolutionary explanation: those who valued and worked towards their own ends survived and had successful offspring. Thus, the intuition survives in the current population. The authors take the first horn of Street's dilemma and claim that a tendency to value one's own well-being and ends has no relationship to moral truth.

For the principle of utilitarianism, which advocates promoting the good of all, Lazari-Radek and Singer take the second of Street's horns.<sup>13</sup> They argue that utilitarianism is not a reasoned extension of a more limited altruism but that it is known intuitively, even self-evidently, through reason. They argue that rationality has reproductive value and that it is part of a cluster of inseparable elements, some of which are neutral or even negative with regard to reproductive advantage. One of these neutral or negative components is the ability to intuit actual moral truth. Pursuing the second horn of Street's dilemma, Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that utilitarianism is a reliable principle, unsullied by evolutionary influences.

Having attempted to defend the principle of utilitarianism from debunking, Lazari-Radek and Singer conclude by proposing three criteria for determining which intuitions are the most reliable.

1. Careful reflection leading to a conviction of self-evidence;
2. Independent agreement of other careful thinkers; and
3. The absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as the outcome of an evolutionary or other non-truth-tracking process.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 26.



They claim that the principle of rational self-interest fails to meet the third criterion and is thus unreliable. They also argue that the principle of utilitarianism withstands debunking, for no plausible explanation can show that acting impartially, for the benefit of all, would confer reproductive success over some degree of partiality.

### **Expanding Circle, Expanded Doubt**

In *The Expanding Circle*, Peter Singer has more to say about the evolutionary origins of morality; he presents a biological history of morality. The account in *TEC* traces our modern day morality to its initial foundations in evolutionary history. By outlining the evolutionary advantages of kin and reciprocal altruism, Singer argues that genuine altruism, emotive concern for another's well-being, has genuine benefits that a feigned altruism would not afford. He argues that groups of genuinely altruistic individuals would collectively have benefits not accessible to groups of solely self-interested individuals.<sup>15</sup> This capacity for genuine concern for others provides an emotive basis of morality.

Recall, however, that in "The Objectivity of Ethics" Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that the principle of utilitarianism is *not* a reasoned extension of a more limited altruism. They claim that it is a truth directly intuited via the capacity to reason.<sup>16</sup> They claim that the principle of utilitarianism is fundamentally about impartiality. While it is deceptively easy to claim that the principle of utilitarianism is directly intuited by reason, this claim is not enough to prevent debunking attempts, for one can imagine a proponent of rational self-interest making a similar claim that rational self-interest, too, is intuited directly by reason despite its analogue in more fundamental intuitions. Still, if the principle of utilitarianism is a reasoned extension of a tendency towards some limited form of impartiality, one may fairly ask if our predisposition for reasoning impartially or trusting impartial modes of thinking has an evolutionary explanation.

Singer provides just such an account in *TEC*. Pre-linguistic humans likely engaged in the proto-moral activities that we can observe in modern apes. Kindness towards others creates the expectation of reciprocation in the future. Those who do not reciprocate are deemed "cheaters" and are often scorned. Before

<sup>15</sup> Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 37 & 49.

<sup>16</sup> Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 23-4.

language, our distant ancestors may have responded with "a friendly lick or an intimidating growl when another member of the group does or does not repay favors."<sup>17</sup> As proto-humans became more rational and developed more sophisticated communication, rudimentary praise and blame developed into actual ethical judgments. According to Singer, ethical judgments require some standard or reason that is acceptable to the group as a whole. When proposing a moral standard to the group, the reason itself must be disinterested, as opposed to a blatant appeal to self-interest, in order to be accepted. Singer says this:

If someone tells us that she may take the nuts another member of the tribe has gathered, but no one may take her nuts, she can be asked why the two cases are different. To answer, she must give a reason. Not just any reason either. In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demand for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole. Thus the reason offered must be disinterested, at least to the extent of being equally acceptable to all...I may say for instance, that my prowess as a warrior entitles me to a bigger share of the nuts. This justification is impartial in the sense that it entails that anyone who equals my prowess as a warrior should get as many nuts.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Singer outlines how the ability to use impartial or disinterested reasons within a community is necessary for the development of moral rules and judgments. He suggests that early humans appealed to impartial modes of thinking because to do so enabled successful living within a relatively small, stable social group of the kind our ancestors had. The appeal to impartiality, however, was not about an appeal to truth in the robust sense required by realists; rather, it was an efficient and essential means of establishing long-term admittance into a group of fellow rational beings.

While neither Singer nor I suggest that early hominids roaming the savanna were in any sense utilitarian, there is a plausible evolutionary account for why humans would reason impartially without appealing to self-evident truths. This account does not

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<sup>17</sup> Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 92.



place impartial modes of reasoning as a potentially disadvantageous sub-capacity of reason; rather it is an evolutionarily advantageous, and perhaps essential, part of social life for rational beings. Humans incapable of providing impartial justifications for their actions would likely have been pushed to the fringes of society. Such unfortunate humans or proto-humans would have been likely candidates for the title “cheater” and scorned as such. Reciprocal interactions with them would have been rejected because their modes of behavior would not have been acceptable to the community at large. It seems that an inability to reason impartially would have been highly reproductively disadvantageous.

### Duality Unresolved

If Singer’s account in *TEC* is acceptable, we must reconsider the conclusions Lazari-Radek and Singer draw in “The Objectivity.” The authors reject the principle of rational self-interest because it fails to meet their three criteria for reliable moral intuitions. They conclude this because of the easily accessible evolutionary explanation for self-interested behavior. The authors go further to suggest the principle of utilitarianism lacks a plausible evolutionary explanation and is merely a product of rational inquiry, and thus it is very likely to reflect moral truth. However, the conclusions derived by the authors fail on a number of points.

First, as Guy Kahane notes, debunking arguments does not test for truth; it tests for justification.<sup>19</sup> Further, principles are not tested by debunking arguments; rather justifications for holding intuitions, beliefs, or attitudes are what are debunked. If someone wants to show that some principle can be debunked, the closest such a person can do is show that the *belief* or *intuition* that the principle is true lacks justification because the belief or intuition’s source is in a non-truth tracking process.<sup>20</sup> As such, neither the principle of rational self-interest nor the principle of utilitarianism can properly be debunked, and neither can be shown to be false. At most we can show that our belief in either lacks justification.

If we accept Lazari-Radek and Singer’s criteria for reliable intuitions, specifically the third requiring the absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as an outcome of an evolutionary process,

<sup>19</sup> Kahane, “Evolution and Impartiality,” 327–341 and “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments,” 103–125.

<sup>20</sup> Kahane, “Evolution and Impartiality,” 330.



then neither self-interested nor impartial tendencies are *prima facie* justified. There seem to be evolutionary advantages to thinking or acting both partially and impartially. Should the authors again claim that the principle of utilitarianism is immune to debunking as it is product of reason, despite the evolutionary account given in *TEC*, parity requires that this option be open to the proponent of rational self-interest as well. It seems both are at least plausibly the rational extension of more basic evolved tendencies. In this case, belief in both principles is debunked, or neither is, and Sidgwick's duality is intact.

Second, perhaps it is impermissible to subject particular intuitions to Sharon Street's dilemma. She suggests that "many" or "most" of our evaluative attitudes have been influenced by selective pressures. Street does not suggest that we put particular beliefs or intuitions to her dilemma individually. Perhaps there is reproductive advantage in acting partially *and* impartially. Seemingly inconsistent evaluative tendencies can allow flexibility in how humans respond to changing circumstances. When resources are scarce, it may be advantageous to steal from others to feed oneself and one's offspring. When resources are abundant, social harmony and the need to be impartial may have great reproductive value. In separating one intuition from another, it may be that we are missing the overall point: a broad spectrum of evaluative attitudes has greater value than a select few.

Third, Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest that "if a starting point can be debunked, it cannot lend support to a more general or less arbitrary version of itself."<sup>21</sup> When the principle of utilitarianism is debunked, it is the belief in the principle that is debunked. If Sidgwick's or Mill's arguments for utilitarianism are believed to be sound, it may not be enough to check whether there is an evolutionary explanation for our belief that the utilitarianism conclusion is true. Rather, we may need to consider whether any of the premises on which the conclusion depends have an evolutionary debunking explanation. Should we be able to show that our acceptance of some premise is due to a non-truth tracking influence, it must follow that the conclusion it at least partially unjustified as well, even if it seems unlikely that any evolutionary force, absent the use of reason, would compel us to believe in the derived conclusion, axiom, or principle.

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<sup>21</sup> Lazari-Radek and Singer, "The Objectivity of Ethics," 24.



## Conclusion

If the previous arguments hold, Sidgwick's duality is left unresolved. Both rational self-interest and the principle of utilitarianism have footing in non-truth tracking processes, and, thus, our intuition that either is true lacks justification. However, this conclusion need not lead us to moral skepticism. Street's dilemma is posed against stance-independent meta-ethical realists. We might reject stance-independent meta-ethical realism and preserve the utilitarian doctrine. If a proponent of rational self-interest were not a realist and if Singer amends or rejects his account in *The Expanding Circle*, Lazari-Radek and Singer's conclusion would still have little significance for her.

# Multilateral Retributivism: Justifying Change

*Richard R. Eva*

**Abstract:** In this paper I argue for a theory of punishment I call Multilateral Retributivism. Typically retributive notions of justice are unilateral: focused on one person's desert. I argue that our notions of desert are multilateral: multiple people are owed when a moral crime is committed. I argue that the purpose of punishment is communication with the end-goal of reconciling the offender to society. This leads me to conclude that the death penalty and life without parole are unjustified because they necessarily cut communication short.

## Introduction

I argue for a theory of punishment that I have called Multilateral Retributivism, which espouses a retributive notion of desert that is not limited solely to the offender but extends to others because *we all* deserve to communicate our condemnation of an act that does not live up to the moral standards of our community. I argue that we communicate our condemnation through punishment in order to instigate remorse in the offender, which should lead to a meaningful apology and our forgiveness. I conclude that life without parole and the death penalty are unjustified punishments.

## Multilateral Retributivism

I recommend a retributivism that is multilateral. Ordinarily, retributivism is thought of as *unilateral*, where the only person *owed* anything is the offender. If the offender receives the punishment he or she deserves, then the “moral scale” is re-balanced.

J.G. Murphy explains the “free-riding” theory of retributive justice that embodies the unilateral concept. All agents are forced to exercise some level of self-restraint by accepting our government and living under the rule of law. If someone breaks the law, he or she “violates a basic principle of fairness by being a free-rider on this cooperative scheme since he [or she] derives the benefits without



making the appropriate sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, punishment can be seen as a debt owed to everyone else in order to re-even the playing field.

One problem with the free-rider articulation of the unilateral version of retributivism is that we do not naturally think like this. As Murphy points out, we do not think a murderer should be punished because he or she is a free-rider; we think punishment should occur because this person is a *murderer*.<sup>2</sup> More generally, the unilateral version of retributivism does not line up with widely held intuitions. If it only mattered that the offender received his or her desert, then we could, hypothetically, punish the offender in secret; the victim and society should not have to *know* the offender is being punished. According to unilateral retributivism, the scale would be re-balanced simply because the offender got what *the offender* deserved. Again, this does not seem right.

In multilateral retributivism the offender is not the only agent who is or should be *owed* something. Rather, we all deserve to know that the offender is getting what is deserved. A critic may wonder: why do we *deserve* to know that the punishment is taking place? I answer: as a community of moral agents, we deserve to know that we have communicated our condemnation of an act expressed through punishment. I defend this communicative aspect of multilateral retributivism by supporting three claims: (1) the purpose of punishment is communication, (2) punishment is the best mechanism for this communication, and (3) we deserve to see our communication carried out.

## The Purpose of Punishment

The purpose of punishment is to communicate our condemnation of an act that does not live up to our values and moral standards as a community. In “The Expressive Function of Punishment” Joel Feinberg advocates a view similar to mine.<sup>3</sup> He argues that the purpose of punishment is to *express* our condemnation. He distinguishes between penalties and punishments. He says that penalties are like licensing fees: one can park in a reserved spot if one is willing to pay the fee. But there is something seriously different about an action, like a felony, that warrants a punishment. They are

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Some Second Thoughts on Retributivism,” in *Retributivism: Essays on Theory and Policy*, ed. Mark D. White, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Feinberg, “The Expressive Function of Punishment,” *The Monist* 49, no. 3 (1965): 400.

both "authoritative deprivations for failures; but apart from these common features, penalties have a miscellaneous character, whereas punishments have an important additional expressive function."<sup>4</sup>

We express our condemnation of an act that does not meet our moral standards and values because, as R. A. Duff says, "We owe it to ourselves collectively, as members of a polity that defines itself by a shared commitment to certain values."<sup>5</sup> Duff explains that civil society is not and cannot be made up of strangers who have nothing in common. He intends "in common" as in a "shared understanding of the values that define [our] civic life."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most important shared understanding we have is the standard of how we treat one another. Our laws formally define what we expect from the members of our community, and our criminal justice system enforces that expectation through punishment. "What a community chooses to punish, and how severely, tells us what it values and how much."<sup>7</sup>

Punishment expresses our resentment, indignation, disapproval, and, ultimately, our condemnation. For larger infractions like murder or theft we can see how the expression of our condemnation could escalate to an irrational and inhumane vengeance. Luckily, infringements of this higher level are institutionalized to provide more humane, fair, and objective expression of the community's condemnation. Our criminal justice system tames our natural inclinations towards our potentially over-reactive vengeance. I think J.F. Stephen makes a great analogy: "The criminal law stands to the passion of revenge in much the same relation as marriage to the sexual appetite."<sup>8</sup> The same goes for our retributive notions; these notions are of the utmost importance and should be respected, but they must be constrained in order to be most effective in promoting justice.

Another important aspect to note is that the expression of our condemnation is not separate from the punishment itself. We do not express our condemnation and *then* punish the offender.<sup>9</sup> The expression of condemnation accompanies the punishment because punishment symbolizes public reprobation. Feinberg analogizes this

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> R. A. Duff, "Responsibility, Restoration, and Retribution," in *Retributivism Has a Past: Has It a Future?*, ed. Michael H. Tonry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Wenzel, Tyler G. Okimoto, Norman T. Feather, and Michael J. Platow, "Retributive and Restorative Justice," *Law and Human Behavior* 32, no. 5 (2008): 382.

<sup>8</sup> James Fitzjames Stephen, *General View of the Criminal Law of England*, (London: 1863), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Feinberg, "The Expressive Function of Punishment," 402.



symbolism to black being the color of mourning or champagne being the alcoholic drink of celebration.<sup>10</sup> Punishment *itself* is expressing the community's condemnation of an action.

I advance Feinberg's view beyond mere expression to communication of condemnation. If an inanimate object fell and caused a drink to spill on you, you would not give the object an expression of your anger like you would a person. This is because a person (a moral agent) has the ability to respond. This can be termed *reactivity* (what you do in response to the moral action) and *co-reactivity* (how the offender reacts to your reaction). We do not merely express our indignation and then walk away. We expect the offender to respond in some way. For our communication to be complete, we will react to the offender's co-reaction. For example, if a person apologizes, we may forgive him or her. Punishment is more than expression; it is part of a communication.

### **The Mechanism of Communication**

Thus far I have argued that the purpose of punishment is to communicate our condemnation of an action. One may wonder: if the point of punishment is communication, why can we not make the mechanism of communication more like normal communication itself? Why do we need to involve hard treatment like jail time? Why not just send offenders angry letters condemning their actions?

R.A. Duff's paper, "Responsibility, Restoration, and Retribution" is very helpful here. He argues that punishment makes our communication of condemnation extremely effective by making it harder to ignore.<sup>11</sup> If our mechanism of communication is just a letter of conviction or some other gesture, it can be easy for offenders to ignore.

The main reason that punishment is an appropriate mechanism is that it can create a *meaningful apology*. We communicate in order to instigate a response (ideally an apology), and punishment is how we communicate. Duff argues that punishment is the best way to create an effective apology: "[when] the wrong is more serious, or when the victim and the wrongdoer do not stand in the kind of relationship in which words can carry sufficient moral weight, words

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Duff, "Responsibility, Restoration, and Retribution," 78.

are not enough, since words can be too cheap and too easy."<sup>12</sup> The *burden* of punishment can give an apology meaning because it allows the offender to understand the weight of the crime committed. And, although we cannot make offenders go through the exact same thing as their victims, we can still enforce the burden of hard treatment. If the offender goes through a proportional hardship, then he or she can further sympathize with the victim's pain and, hopefully, understand the gravity of his or her infringement upon the moral standards of the community, thus allowing for the potential of a meaningful apology.

### **Knowledge of Communication**

If punishment is an apt mechanism to communicate condemnation, we may ask: why do we have to *know* that this communication through punishment is happening? The first and most practical reason is that if we do not know of punishments, then the government cannot be held responsible for, say, reducing sentences for cost-efficiency or sentencing overly harsh punishments. Basically, the government needs to be held in check by the people.

A second reason for public knowledge of condemnation through punishment is because the offender's punishment is the beginning of his or her response: the co-reaction. While a criminal's sentence is not his or her *actual* response to us, we do know that the criminal will experience that sentence as a burden. We are entitled to know the burden the offender will endure. This is something we need to know because, as I mentioned, a burden can make an apology meaningful. If we know the punishment, we know that there is potential for the offender to make a meaningful apology. If we did not know the punishment, we could not know if there were the potential for a meaningful apology. Knowing the burden, and thus the potential for meaningful apology, gives us the ability to truly forgive the offender.

### **Communication Restrains**

It may appear that I am attempting to justify our current criminal justice system as it is. However, the way I have looked at our system entails the need for significant change. We have established

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 72.



that offenders and society at large deserve communication when an offense has been committed. This communication is inherently two-way; it is a conversation. We communicate through punishment in order to elicit a meaningful apology. But this cannot be the end of it. The point at which the apology is accepted and forgiveness is given is the point at which the scales are rebalanced; everyone has gotten what they deserve. The victim(s) deserved a meaningful apology that they could accept, and the offender deserved punishment and eventual forgiveness (if earned). The way we communicate our forgiveness as a society is by receiving the offenders back into our community and relieving them of their punishment.

Not every criminal will or should be forgiven, but every criminal *can* be forgiven if the punishment has produced a meaningful apology. Once a meaningful apology is made, it *should* be accepted. If not, we are merely unjustly holding a grudge. It is unhealthy for victims to hold onto grudges of this sort. Kevin Carlsmith argues that people who cling to vengeful attitudes actually become angrier.<sup>13</sup> What makes victims feel best is eventually letting go. “Revenge can prolong people’s hedonic reactions to a transgression because punishing others can cause people to continue to think about (rather than forget) those whom they have punished.”<sup>14</sup>

We must allow for the potential of an apology and forgiveness because the purpose of punishment, as I have justified it, is to communicate our condemnation. Multiple parties are owed something under this justification, and punishments such as the death penalty or life without parole prematurely sever communication. They do not allow the *possibility* of forgiveness. This would be not to allow for the purpose of punishment in the first place (communication) by eliminating the potential for the offender’s co-reaction, thus eliminating his or her chance to be forgiven, and eliminating the opportunity for all to get what is deserved from the conversation. Communication, as the purpose of punishment, begins a moral conversation that we cannot, and should not, cut short.

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<sup>13</sup> Kevin M. Carlsmith, Timothy D. Wilson, and Daniel T. Gilbert, “The Paradoxical Consequences of Revenge,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 6 (2008): 1316–1324.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1324.



# The Intersections between Self-Deception and Inconsistency: An Examination of Bad Faith and Cognitive Dissonance

*Hannah Bahnmilller*

**Abstract:** The relationship between the concepts of bad faith, coined by Jean-Paul Sartre, and cognitive dissonance, developed by Leon Festinger, is often misunderstood. Frequently, the terms are over-generalized and equivocated as synonymous ideas. This paper attempts to clarify the intricacies of these two concepts, outlining their similarities and differences.

*Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.*  
 – Aldous Huxley, Proper Studies

## Introduction

This paper is an exploratory work into the interrelation between Jean-Paul Sartre’s phenomenological concept of bad faith and Leon Festinger’s psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. Throughout this paper, I unpack the similarities and differences between the two concepts. To accomplish this, I first examine the concepts of bad faith and cognitive dissonance individually to provide a necessary foundation to their understanding and eventual comparison. This requires looking at the framework and methodologies in which the concepts are constructed. After the individual examination, I proceed to a discussion about the relationship between the two, framed in the authors’ understandings of the concepts. Specifically, I question if cognitive dissonance only results from instances of bad faith and, conversely, if bad faith always produces cognitive dissonance. If bad faith *does* always result in cognitive dissonance, what implications are revealed?

## Bad Faith

Sartre’s conception of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is directly influenced by his phenomenological background. Bad faith is framed in Sartre’s ontological assumptions about the dualistic nature



of human existence as consciousness and ego. His ontological examination begins with the lived experience of the self, and, in this way, his ontology is grounded in the phenomenological approach. He examines consciousness and the ego through the lens of the primary and reflective experiences. For him, consciousness is singularly present in the primary experience. The ego is unavoidably within the reflective experience to limit the absolute possibilities of consciousness by creating a static identity from previous experiences. Based on this understanding, he concludes the human condition is paradoxical. It tries to simultaneously refuse its consciousness, which entails radical possibility, and its ego, which attempts to define the self as a static object.

Sartre's ontology begins by considering the structure of consciousness. For him, consciousness is "a connected series of bursts which tear us out of ourselves" and towards the world.<sup>1</sup> The world is not fully graspable by consciousness since it is necessarily beyond it, but at the same time the experiences of consciousness are situated within the world. Sartre describes, "Consciousness and the world are given at one stroke: essentially external to consciousness, the world is nevertheless essentially relative to consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Consciousness is constituted by the world, and, at the same time, the world is founded by the existence of consciousness.

Consciousness is also inherent in every experience because experience would not be possible without it, but it is solely present during the primary experience. Consciousness is externally directed, and, therefore, the "reflecting consciousness" is never the object of itself.<sup>3</sup> As we know from Edmund Husserl's structure of "intentionality," to be conscious is to be conscious *of* (something). Yet when approaching an object in the primary experience, one does not think, "I am approaching the object." The object is simply approached. It becomes evident that the ego does not exist during the primary experience because it would be redundant and even destructive.

The ego is created in the reflective (as opposed to *reflecting*) experience. Reflection, for Sartre, is an inherent part of consciousness; thus, the ego is inevitably created as an object of consciousness. But why is reflection intrinsic to consciousness? This

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology," in *The Phenomenology Reader*, eds. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (New York: Routledge, 2002), 383.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Transcendence of the Ego," in Moran, *The Phenomenology Reader*, 389.

originates in the feeling of anxiety produced by the absolute freedom of consciousness. Consciousness is beyond its own grasp and is in constant flux, producing the feeling of a "vertigo of possibility."<sup>4</sup> There is no certainty for the next moment; anything can be decided from the freedom that is consciousness. The indeterminacy of each moment is overwhelming and produces feelings of anxiety and unsettledness. To cope with this anxiety, consciousness must construct a static identity by reflecting on and interpreting previous experiences. The ego is the product of this reflection. It is created by internalizing our past experiences, qualities, and states. It is tantamount to a static self, being some-thing. The ego grounds the radical uncertainty of consciousness by creating a self that is defined and bounded. But this construction is limited in that it is only an edifice.

The ego does not actually limit the possibilities of consciousness. It simply creates *an illusion* that certain possibilities are beyond it. Consciousness recognizes it is not limited by the facticity of the ego and attempts to negate this facticity by extending beyond the static, defined self. Although the self does not want to be completely objectified as some-thing, neither does it want the anxiety of endless possibility, being no-thing. This, for Sartre, is the paradox of the human condition.

The concept of bad faith emerges from the paradoxical condition of being neither fully transcendent nor fully immanent. The self attempts to negate either its transcendence or its facticity. It tries to reduce itself to pure transcendence or pure immanence: I am only what I have been or not at all what I have been. This simplification fails to recognize the duality of the self as both constructed by its past experiences *and* open to innumerable future possibilities.

Because the self recognizes it is irreducible to either state, bad faith is essentially self-deception. One simultaneously becomes the deceiver and the deceived. To lie, one must be aware of the whole truth that one is hiding. As Sartre describes, "The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding. A man does not lie about what he is ignorant of; he does not lie when he spreads an error of which he himself is the dupe; he does not lie when he is mistaken."<sup>5</sup> How, then, can one be the deceiver—who, by definition, knows

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Bad Faith," in Moran, *The Phenomenology Reader*, 408.



the truth—and the deceived—who inherently does not? Bad faith, therefore, produces another paradoxical situation.

### Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger's psychological theory of cognitive dissonance is constructed within the rationalist assumption that people strive to be logical and consistent. For him, cognition is primarily influenced by reality—that is, the outside world. Festinger speculates:

...elements of cognition correspond for the most part with what the person actually does or feels or what actually exists in the environment. In the case of opinions, beliefs, and values, the reality may be what others think or do; in other instances the reality may be what is encountered experientially or what others have told him.<sup>6</sup>

He frequently terms elements of cognition as “knowledges.”<sup>7</sup> This is not knowledge in the Platonic sense of absolute truth, but rather knowledge is “...the things a person knows about himself, about his beliefs, and about his surroundings.”<sup>8</sup> Knowledges can be facts, opinions, actions, or reactions.

When one knowledge ( $x$ ) contradicts another knowledge ( $y$ ), a feeling of discomfort is produced. This discomfort is cognitive dissonance. Reality, instead of being consistent, is interpreted as illogical and contradictory. Festinger, therefore, reasons people attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance by resolving contradictions and restoring reality to its desired logical state.

Relationships between knowledges can be understood as irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant.<sup>9</sup> In irrelevant relations,  $x$  has no impact on  $y$ . For example, knowing, “You must be eighteen to vote,” and, “North Dakota is a state,” are examples of two irrelevant knowledges. Conversely, consonant and dissonant knowledges have direct relations and imply some sort of impact. In consonant relations,  $y$  follows from  $x$ . An example would be, “She is

<sup>6</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The following analysis is based on the relationship between two knowledges. In reality, every knowledge is related to an infinite number of other knowledges; therefore, this is a limited analysis and must be recognized as so.

heterosexual, so she is attracted to men." Dissonant relations occur when  $y$  is inconsistent with or contradictory to  $x$ . For instance, "She knows she should prepare for class, but instead she goes out with friends," is an example of this relationship.

Dissonant relationships are produced in many types of circumstances, but here I focus on two main instances. First, dissonance can emerge when new information is learned or new events are experienced and these contradict previous information or experiences. For instance, a man assumes eating dairy is necessary for a healthy diet, but then he hears arguments for a vegan diet. The new information is dissonant with his previous assumption and produces discomfort. Second, dissonance can be created when making decisions that are ambiguous or require compromise. Decisions produce dissonance because both choices usually have benefits. When one choice is rejected, the positive aspects associated with that decision are also discarded, producing dissonance. As an example, a man is buying a home and likes the structure of one house more but the location of another better. He chooses the home with the better location, but discomfort occurs when he considers the advantages of the other home.

It becomes apparent that momentary dissonance is inevitable. New knowledge is continuously being learned, new events are experienced, and decisions and compromises are constantly being made. The resulting dissonance is initially uncomfortable; as a result, there are usually attempts to resolve it. Dissonance can be reconciled by changing a behavior to become consistent with a knowledge.  $Y$  can be altered so it follows from  $x$ . Likewise, knowledge can be changed to support an action.  $X$  can be manipulated so it precedes  $y$ .

To elaborate on this concept, I examine the hypothetical example of a woman (termed "the smoker") who smokes cigarettes daily but, at the same time, knows smoking is dangerous to her health. The smoker is faced with dissonance because she wants to smoke but simultaneously does not want to damage her health. The dissonance created can be resolved by changing either her actions or her beliefs. She can choose to stop smoking; then her actions will fit with her belief that smoking is bad. On the other hand, she can choose not to believe smoking is harmful to her health and continue to smoke. In addition, she can also choose to change the type of relationship between the two knowledges. She can convince herself that she does not care about her health; therefore, it is irrelevant if she continues to smoke.



In cases when dissonance is not or cannot be resolved, attempts can be made to reduce it. The magnitude of dissonance is related to the importance of the elements.<sup>10</sup> As the significance of each knowledge increases, so does the amount of dissonance produced when it is contradicted. Therefore, dissonance can be reduced by changing the importance of one or both of the knowledges involved. The smoker may acknowledge smoking is bad for her health but argue it is not as harmful as some people say. Similarly, she might continue smoking but reduce the amount she smokes; therefore, rationalizing it is not as bad for her health.

Why would a person resist removing or reducing cognitive dissonance if it produces discomfort? Festinger lists several circumstances in which one may resist the change of knowledge. First, change may be perceived as more uncomfortable than the dissonance caused by the contradiction. In the example of the smoker, it is uncomfortable to quit smoking, and she may interpret this discomfort to be greater than the dissonance she experiences. Second, change may be avoided when the behavior or knowledge is immensely satisfying. Smoking is enjoyable for the smoker, and this pleasure may be greater than the discomfort of the dissonance. Only when the discomfort of dissonance outweighs other discomforts and/or satisfactions does a person feel compelled to change behavioral or cognitive elements.

## Comparison

### *Knowledge*

Sartre and Festinger employ different approaches to knowledge. Sartre's approach begins with the lived experience and then results in an ontological claim. Festinger, on the other hand, employs psychological studies and theory.

For Sartre, knowledge is one mode of being towards the world. Knowledge cannot be perfect because the object of knowing is always beyond consciousness. It is neither fully graspable nor digestible, but rather it is continually experienced by consciousness reaching out toward it. Knowledge must be based in the experience of the world because experience without consciousness is not possible. Sartre rejects the rationalism of thinkers like Descartes and follows the phenomenological tradition by positing that knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 16.

is only possible through lived experience. He approaches bad faith through this lived experience. He does not presume its existence but instead questions how the paradox between transcendence and immanence manifests itself and how we humans respond to this paradox.

Festinger's approach to knowledge, on the other hand, is based within rationalism and the scientific method.<sup>11</sup> Festinger's argument is founded on the metaphysical assumption that people attempt to be logical and consistent. Festinger employs established social psychological theory and experimentation to ground his claim. He not only relies on the social experiments of others, but in 1959, along with the help of James Carlsmith, published the results of his experiments concerning cognitive dissonance.<sup>12</sup> This experimental, research-based method drastically differs from Sartre's phenomenological approach to knowledge that is based in the lived experience.

### *Unity of Consciousness*

Both Sartre's and Festinger's concepts are understood within the framework of a unified consciousness. This implies consciousness is aware of itself and its existence. It is understood as a whole rather than disparate parts. The implications for this understanding result in the possibility of bad faith and cognitive dissonance. Since it is completely aware of itself and its parts, a unified consciousness must perceive self-deception and inconsistent knowledge. This differs from a Freudian view of the psyche as composed dually of the ego and the id, or a consciousness and an unconscious.<sup>13</sup> From the viewpoint of a divided consciousness, completely realized self-deception is possible, and inconsistent beliefs can be held without producing discomfort. One part of a consciousness can conceal knowledge from the other; one part can be the deceiver and the other the deceived. The idea of the divided consciousness is rejected by both Sartre and Festinger.

<sup>11</sup> This knowledge differs from the term "knowledges" used in the previous section; in this context, it refers to factual understanding of the world rather than cognitive elements.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58, no. 2 (1959): 203-210.

<sup>13</sup> Sartre, "Bad Faith," 410.



## Discussion

### *Cognitive Dissonance Resulting from Bad Faith*

Cognitive dissonance arises from many different situations as elaborated on above, but these circumstances are not inevitably an enactment of bad faith. Bad faith is the result of an attempt to negate the self's transcendence or facticity, but cognitive dissonance can be produced from situations where both states are affirmed. The smoker experiences cognitive dissonance because of the inconsistency between her knowledge that smoking is bad and her continuation of the behavior. This is not necessarily bad faith because this knowledge does not reflect her outlook towards existence. She is neither maintaining that she cannot quit smoking because of some innate, definite characteristic, nor is she rejecting the real impact smoking has on her health. She can, in fact, recognize the adverse effects of smoking and the possibility of quitting but simply *choose* to continue to smoke and be in good faith, albeit while still producing dissonance.

### *Bad Faith Resulting in Cognitive Dissonance*

On the other hand, although cognitive dissonance does not automatically produce instances of bad faith, bad faith necessitates dissonance because of the inherent, paradoxical state created through its condition. Within the framework of a unified consciousness, the truth cannot be known and fully hidden within one entity. This is a logical inconsistency inherent to bad faith. As a result, bad faith always results in cognitive dissonance. This dissonance, however, can be reduced. Rationalization and avoidance or denial are two techniques employed to reduce the dissonance produced by bad faith. Behaviors are rationalized through negating the importance of either transcendence or facticity: *I cannot* quit smoking, *I will not* get cancer, etc. Certain thoughts or actions may be avoided that remind the person of one's radical freedom or one's limitations by reality. The smoker may not read an article about tips to quit smoking since it reminds her it is, in fact, possible for her to quit. These reactions to bad faith are produced because of the dissonance that is inherent to it.



### Implications

What implications follow if bad faith inevitably results in cognitive dissonance? If this question is placed within the previously constructed framework of Sartre's and Festinger's concepts, the result of bad faith is a turbulent state in which discomfort is continually avoided but always encountered again. I term this state "the cycle of discomfort." Sartre claims bad faith results from trying to avoid our paradoxical human condition, but bad faith then produces cognitive dissonance because we recognize our self-deception. Festinger posits that people will attempt to remedy cognitive dissonance, which, in this case, implies the termination of bad faith. This again places a person in the ambiguous condition that is neither fully transcendent nor fully imminent. The cycle is again enacted in order to continually flee the discomfort associated with paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

Does this mean human existence is destined to continually enact the cycle of discomfort? In her book *How Are We to Confront Death?* Françoise Dastur discusses the anxiety she claims characterizes the human relationship with death and, thus, is inherent in life itself.<sup>14</sup> She describes ways in which people attempt to overcome, neutralize, and finally accept death. She concludes that death cannot be accepted by attempting to overcome the anxiety associated with it, since, for her, anxiety is inherent in our relationship with death— an ungraspable phenomenon by definition. Instead, it is anxiety, rather than death itself, that must be accepted. She describes, "This calm before death...is less the work of asceticism than of detachment, and we may be able to achieve it not by situating ourselves beyond anxiety, but rather by accepting the possibility that we can remain within anxiety, as in the still zone at the center of whirlwinds."<sup>15</sup> When the impossibility to escape the anxiety of death is accepted, we become able to view death as an inherent and unavoidable aspect of the human condition. It is no longer a limiting characteristic but essential to life. We no longer need to flee from death and the anxiety associated with it, but instead we can recognize the anxiety, accept it, and "achieve that moment when it changes into joy."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?*, trans. Robert Vallier, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



In the same way, it may be possible to accept the discomfort associated with our inherently paradoxical human condition. Our ambiguous relationship with consciousness as both transcendence and facticity and the discomfort that arises from it does not need to be resolved or negated but rather accepted. We do not need to escape this state by enacting bad faith and thereby perpetuating discomfort; instead, we can sit in this ambiguity and accept it as an essential part of the human existence. In this way, we can recognize the possibilities for both transcendental and immanent experiences that arise from this state. It is not a limitation to human existence but instead constitutes it.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explains, compares, and synthesizes two frequently misunderstood concepts within philosophy and psychology in order to provide insight into the human experience of the world. I demonstrate that bad faith and cognitive dissonance are not synonymous, but bad faith's logical inconsistencies do necessitate the experience of dissonance. Bad faith originates in consciousness's anxiety-provoking, ambiguous nature. As a result, we attempt to negate either our facticity or our freedom, thereby initiating a cycle of discomfort in which we continually deny, and again are forced to recognize, our dualistic, paradoxical being. But this cycle of discomfort is not intrinsic to the human experience. Instead of fleeing from the discomfort of paradox and ambiguity, we must accept these qualities as characteristic to our experience of the world rather than a limitation to it. In this way, we are able to simultaneously recognize both the endless possibilities for the future and the realities of the past. We are no longer condemned to recurrent self-deception and inconsistency but are able exist in the world in good faith.

# RETHINKING PHILOSOPHY AND RACE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES MILLS



*The Stance team spoke with Charles Mills, noted philosopher and John Evans Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy at Northwestern University whose work focuses on issues of social class, gender, and race, on December 1, 2014. Dr. Mills reviewed Stance's transcription of the interview and made slight corrections for grammar, style, and reduction of repetition. He also inserted a sentence or two to add clarity. We hope readers find the result illuminating.*

**STANCE (ARTHUR SOTO): BEFORE PURSUING A PHD IN PHILOSOPHY YOU WERE A PROFESSOR OF PHYSICS. WHAT INITIATED YOUR INTEREST IN PHILOSOPHY? WHAT SERVED AS THE IMPETUS FOR YOUR ENROLLMENT IN A GRADUATE PHILOSOPHY PROGRAM? AND IN WHAT CAPACITY, IF ANY, DID YOUR SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND INFLUENCE YOUR APPROACH TO PHILOSOPHY?**

**CHARLES MILLS:** *Daily Nous*, the philosophy website <<http://dailynous.com>>, had a feature recently in which they invited people to write in about how they got into philosophy. What I said there was that my doing physics at university was a product of chance, rather than choice. In my high school back in Jamaica, which is where I'm from, the humanities teachers had left the year I went up into the last two years of school. And at that time Jamaican high schools were modeled on the British schooling system, where you specialize in your last two years. That meant I had to do sciences in those last two years—what was called at the time “sixth form”—math, physics, and chemistry. Then, having done math, physics, and chemistry at that level (“A”-levels), I was constrained in what kind of degree I could enroll for at the University of West Indies, where I did my undergraduate degree. In the U.S. system I would have had more flexibility, but all I had there was a choice of doing sciences. So, that's really why I ended up doing science—not because I had any love for it. My preference was really for the humanities subjects, but it just had to do with the fact of people having left.

Having then graduated and started teaching, I thought, “This is really not what I want to do with the rest of my life.” I considered a range of options. I considered English, political science, history—various possibilities—because at that time in Jamaica a lot of interesting things were happening politically and culturally. If you think of the sixties in the U.S., it was a sort of equivalent, the seventies in Jamaica and the English Caribbean—a time of protest, a time of



social justice movements, a time of challenge to the existing order. I wanted to be involved intellectually with those kinds of movements, and physics was clearly not the subject for that. I made a choice of different possibilities, and I ended up choosing philosophy because I had this sort of naïve, young person's conception of philosophy as a subject that potentially gave you the big picture. So, that was the reason for my choice.

In terms of what influence my science background might have had on my philosophy, I would say not a huge influence or maybe not much influence at all. The main thing, I think, is that in physics they always used to tell you to draw a diagram to help you to understand the problem at hand. In some of my papers I've incorporated diagrams to try to illustrate conceptual points. So, maybe that's one influence. Another thing is that a lot of people who self-identify as radical in cultural theory are anti-science. Because of my science background, I'm not one of those people. My argument, which is a fairly standard argument, is that science has been misused, but it's not the case that we should be anti-science as such. Another element might be that because I've made that disciplinary leap I've always found it natural to draw on empirical research for my philosophy work. I routinely read outside of philosophy texts. I read material from sociology, from political science, from history, and so forth, and then I try to put a philosophical spin on it. You can see there, perhaps, an indirect consequence of switching disciplines to begin with. I find it natural to not necessarily stay within philosophy when I'm trying to make philosophical points.

**STANCE (AS): IN INTRODUCTORY PHILOSOPHY COURSES, MINORITY STUDENTS CONSTITUTE A PERCENTAGE OF ENROLLMENTS PROPORTIONATE TO THEIR GENERAL REPRESENTATION IN COLLEGE, ALBEIT THE LATTER IS AN UNDERREPRESENTATION COMPARED TO THE OVERALL RACIAL MAKEUP IN SOCIETY. HOWEVER, THIS ALREADY STARK LACK OF MINORITIES IS FURTHER INTENSIFIED WHEN ONE LOOKS AT THE NUMBER OF MINORITY STUDENTS WHO CHOOSE TO STUDY PHILOSOPHY AS A MAJOR OR A MINOR. THIS IS A PHENOMENON OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE "PIPELINE EFFECT." WHY DOES OUR FIELD FAIL TO RETAIN THESE STUDENTS AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MINIMIZE THIS EFFECT?**

**CM:** I'd say it's a combination of factors. One is that the canon is so overwhelmingly white. Many minority students will get no exposure at all to the few philosophy books and articles written by people of color and dealing with race. (Not every philosopher of color chooses to work on race.) So, that's a factor.

Then, it's linked with the fact that philosophy is the oldest discipline of all. (Many of what we recognize as separate disciplines today are actually spinoffs from philosophy—natural science was originally referred to as “natural philosophy.”) This means we are still reading

[There are] the pretensions of philosophy that it's dealing with timeless and abstract matters. If you have that self-conception, it could seem as if race and racialized experience would make no difference.

texts, in the Western tradition, from 2500 years ago, and they are still seen as part of a living dialogue. It's not a young subject like sociology. So, the weight of the past is much greater in that there is this huge body of work going back more than 2000 years. Within the Western tradition, this large weight is—a somewhat mixed metaphor—a white past. So, you have the whiteness of the canon, and that's reinforced by the demography. Demographically

philosophy is just 2-to-3 percent minorities, maybe 97 percent white. Roughly 1 percent African-American, maybe another 1 or 2 percent Latinos/as and Asian Americans, and a handful of Native Americans. So, there's little chance of students on the undergraduate level, or the graduate level for that matter, being exposed to a class taught by a person of color. Insofar as the role model argument has some value to it, some minority students will think, “Well, I don't see anybody like me in this subject.”

There's also, I think, a particular feature coming out of the nature of philosophy's pretensions, the pretensions of philosophy that it's dealing with timeless and abstract matters. If you have that self-conception, it could seem as if race and racialized experience would make no difference. Sure, race could make a difference in sociology. Race could make a difference in political science. Obviously, in the world of literature, in the world of fiction and poetry and plays, race could make a difference insofar as there are different ethnic literary



traditions in one country. But you could assume that philosophy is raceless almost by definition. So, why should race be a worthwhile topic of philosophical investigation in the first place?

If you put all of these together, you get a set of mechanisms that interact in positive feedback loops to reproduce whiteness: an ongoing set of factors, a cumulative effect that perpetuates the whiteness of the discipline. There are some positive attempts under way at changing things. There's a Society of Young Black Philosophers, for example, and they have a website. You can go to it and link up with people—not just people who already have PhDs and are assistant professors, but graduate students, and I think even undergraduate students as well. There's a Collegium of Black Women in Philosophy, under the leadership of Kathryn Gines, and they hold regular conferences. There's the Caribbean Philosophical Association. You can establish a virtual community across the country by virtue of the Internet. There are some positive signs; it's just that the tradition so far has been largely white.

There are also material factors. If you have minority communities, and let's say the children are the first generation of the family to go to college, their parents didn't go to college, their parents might be thinking, and not just thinking, but saying, "Well, we sacrificed to get you in there, paid a lot of money. You really need to be doing something as a major that's going to get you a job when you come out the other side." And, given the way the job market is now for philosophers, you can see philosophy as a high-risk subject.

If you put all of those together, I think you get a fairly straightforward set of explanations.

In terms of what can be done, well, obviously, you—when I say "you," I mean philosophy professors, the largely white professoriate—need to self-consciously seek out minority writings and try to incorporate them into mainstream courses. It would also be good if people tried to teach a course in race. It's not the case that you have to be a person of color to teach a course on race. If you're smart enough to get a PhD, you're certainly smart enough to be able to educate yourself in these fields and to try to teach a course in critical philosophy of race, African American philosophy, Latin American philosophy, and so forth. At the same time, of course, the danger of courses such as these is that they could have a kind of

ghettoizing effect. “If you want to do race, then take these courses; if you want to do regular philosophy, then don’t bother with them.”

So, in addition to teaching courses on race, I think people should also make a self-conscious effort to incorporate such themes into mainstream courses: for example, a course in ethics, a course in political philosophy, a course in metaphysics, a course in epistemology. You might wonder, “How could you do that?” But in fact there is a growing body of work by people, for example, Sally Haslanger at MIT, who are looking at the metaphysics of race and the metaphysics of gender. Political philosophy can be expanded to include writings on the theme of racial justice. Social epistemology lends itself easily to bringing in social factors like race. For the history of philosophy, you could ask, “What non-traditional figures are there, people of color, who could be incorporated into such a history?” For example, W. E. B. Du Bois, whose PhD was in history, but who also had an acquaintance with philosophy, which shows in some of his writings, like *The Souls of Black Folk*. Metaphysical claims about race can be found in his famous 1897 essay, “The Conservation of Races.”

So, white philosophy professors could educate themselves as to what is available, include such material in their courses, and in that way enable minorities to see philosophers address their experiences. Such material would be good for white students as well. One thing that the Ferguson affair has brought home—not as if it needed bringing home very much because it’s been there for a long time—is the divide in perceptions between whites and people of color. If as a white person you take courses like this, it’s valuable for you as well. It will expand your philosophical perspectives, giving you a different sense of the world and exposure to a different worldview, a different experience, a different perspective on things. I should probably emphasize this point more. Incorporating such materials is not merely good in terms of possibly increasing the percentage of people of color in the profession, but it would have a positive effect for white students also.

**STANCE (AS): IN MANY OF YOUR WORKS YOU CALL FOR THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF GLOBAL WHITE SUPREMACY AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF THIS CONCEPTUALIZATION INTO MAINSTREAM POLITICAL**



**AND PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT. IF THIS INITIAL STEP IS SOMEDAY EFFECTIVELY REALIZED, WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE THE IMPACT ON THE NON-ACADEMIC WORLD?**

**CM:** I would like to think that it would make us all much more self-conscious of the centrality of race to the making of the modern world, the ways in which race has permeated everyday life for the past few hundred years. The modern world has been very much shaped by European expansionism, by colonialism. Race was a central rationale for that. For white persons, race is what justified your right to be in these other countries, to rule these other countries, to displace native populations. Of course, from the perspective of people of color it's the opposite: race was a stigmatizing label, you were seen as members of inferior races. Race is a phenomenon that has had trans-disciplinary effects. Insofar as it affects everyday life, it can be studied critically from all kinds of perspectives: sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology, etc. Historically in the natural sciences, race was treated in a racist way insofar as what is called scientific racism—that's racism that has pretensions to being scientifically validated—becomes very important from the 19th century onwards. Leading figures at Ivy League institutions like Harvard, Princeton, and so forth are writing articles and books that claim to give scientific backing to the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of other races. Today, of course, we can draw on natural science to discredit such views.

So, race is relevant across the social sciences, in some of the natural sciences, and in the humanities. Race has affected literature—novels, fiction, short stories, and so forth. Critical race theory, as it has been called, has achieved significant success in some sections of the U.S. academy (and some other countries, like Australia) over the past ten-to-twenty years. With such courses, students can develop a greater and more enlightened self-consciousness about race because part of the problem today is that sometimes race is framed in such a way that it's only people of color who have a race. "They have a race, but we white people are raceless. Race is really their problem, rather than our problem." You then get a sort of distancing from these issues when the reality is, of course, that everybody has a race. Whites have a race also.



I should emphasize that I don't mean race in the biological sense because many scientists think that race in the biological sense has been proven not to exist. To use a phrase that has become a cliché, race is "socially constructed": race is ascribed to you, and then because of that ascription you're slotted into a particular kind of position in the social system. You're categorized a certain way and then this is going to have a positive or negative effect on the opportunities you have, on the life-world in which you move, and so forth.

So, if we live in a racialized world, which continues to have a major impact on people's lives, people's opportunities, people's chances, then obviously that's something we need to be self-conscious about. In terms of descriptive theory, in terms of understanding how the world has worked, both at the micro level, the meso level (the intermediate level of society) and the macro level in terms of global inter-relations, all of this needs systematic investigation. It needs, in some cases, a rethinking of orthodox frameworks. You have a history of race affecting particular disciplines, and then roughly after World War II—because World War II and the Holocaust, and the postwar anti-colonial movement, largely discredit scientific racism—you get a crucial shift. Many theorists of race argue that there was a shift from scientific racism to cultural racism, so that scientific racism is largely (though not completely) delegitimated. For example, *The Bell Curve* by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, which was a best seller twenty years ago, is an example of old-fashioned scientific racism. But the modern variety of racism tends to be more cultural in form. The point is, insofar as race and racism have affected the modern world, contemporary accounts of pre-World War II history now tend to be racially sanitized because from a contemporary perspective it is now embarrassing to acknowledge that it was so routinely taken for granted among the white population that people of color were inferior and that white domination ("white supremacy") was the norm. We need to excavate that history to understand how a wide variety of different disciplines were distorted by these assumptions.

So, all of that comes under the descriptive. But you asked about the non-academic world. This history also has crucial implications for normative issues, issues of social justice, and what we should practically do. The shaping of the world by European colonialism and imperialism involved massive injustices: slavery, Native American



expropriation, genocide. So, corrective justice, arguably, should be a crucial issue for us. We should be asking ourselves, “Given this history, what does social justice demand of us now, not merely on a national scale, but on a global scale?” Given the fundamental shaping effect of this history—in most countries, not in every area, obviously—on divisions of wealth and poverty, on the North/South chasm globally, then if you can make the case that colonialism has been largely responsible for that, and that racism was a central factor, then you have a case for global justice, which would require a fundamental restructuring of the global economic system and the way it creates and perpetuates national advantage and disadvantage. And, I should mention—because this has been in the news lately, with the big conference they’re having on global warming—that a lot of these issues are going to become more acute as time goes on. The likelihood is unfortunately that we’re going to be moving into a world where there are going to be all kinds of increased problems. I think it’s the Marshall Islands, these low-lying Pacific islands, that are going to be flooded, losing terrain. We’re going to have an increase in droughts, and so forth. Some people are predicting food riots and water riots. In this very negative kind of scenario, issues of social justice obviously become even more pressing. You want people to get their due, and, under these circumstances, it’s unfortunately even less likely that they’re going to get their due. I think that we’re moving into an age where it’s really important for us to be thinking about how all these issues interact. There is a really major disadvantaging of people in the global South as against the global North. And it’s deeply affected by race. I would like to see all of these issues more on the table than they currently are.

We should be asking ourselves, “Given this history, what does social justice demand of us now, not merely on a national scale, but on a global scale?”

**STANCE (AS): IN THE ARTICLE “UNDER CLASS UNDER STANDINGS,” YOU DISCUSS THE RESISTANCE OF WHITE MORAL PSYCHOLOGIES TO ACCEPT A FUNDAMENTAL KIND OF CHANGE THAT WOULD REMEDY BLACK PROBLEMS. YOU MENTION THAT POLICIES TO REMEDY BLACK PROBLEMS SHOULD BE PUBLICLY PERCEIVED TO BE ROOTED IN JUSTICE**

**BUT THAT OTHER MOTIVATIONS WILL BE NECESSARY AS WELL. COULD YOU EXPAND ON WHAT THESE OTHER MOTIVATIONS MIGHT BE?**

**CM:** Yeah, sure. It's a fairly long-winded answer, so get ready.

Research in sociology and political science shows that of all the multiple groups in the United States and the multiple divisions within the population on different public policy issues, the divisions on race and race-related questions are far and away the greatest. It's not even close. They eclipse divisions on issues of gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, etc. And what these studies also show is that the primary determinant of the divide in these perceptions is white perceptions of their group interest. It's not individual white self-interest, but white self-consciousness of themselves as being members of a group, self-conscious of their group interests, and how they would be benefited or threatened by different kinds of public policy. You're basically seeing an analysis that brings out the centrality of material group interest. What this suggests is that the leverage that moral suasion on its own is going to have is going to be slight.

There was this really interesting poll three years ago that showed that a majority of white Americans now believe that whites are the race that are most likely to be the victims of racial discrimination. This is not a population that is going to see racial justice as a pressing matter, because they think—I don't mean everybody of course, but a significant number think—"There's a black guy in the White House; racial justice has already been achieved. Why do you guys keep complaining about this? We're the ones that are now being discriminated against." When you have this kind of psychological terrain, a straight moral appeal is unlikely to be able to get things moving. We're not in the period of the 1950s where there are clearly "white" and "colored" signs and segregation either by law or by tradition is the norm. (We still, of course, have a lot of segregation, but it's no longer signposted and backed up by law.) So, it's going to be harder for many whites to see racial injustice as a reality and a problem. This is manifest in the split we saw on Ferguson, the different views whites and blacks have on the extent to which continued racial disparity is the result of social oppression. There's this guy who is writing this series for the *New York Times*, Nicholas



Kristof, on what whites “don’t get.” I think the fifth installment appeared recently. It’s centered to a large extent on this gap in cognition, this gap in perception, between whites and blacks. So, if moral appeal is unlikely to get things moving, then what will?

Well, one possible answer is to try to embed a racial justice project in a larger social democratic justice project. What you try to do is split off that section of the white population who are closer to the bottom of the social ladder: the white poor, the white unemployed, the white working class. You appeal to them and say, “Look, this system is not working that well for you either.” Historically, a lot of whites have measured how they’re doing in a way that has been intrinsically relational. It’s not necessarily been determined by how they’ve been doing in absolute terms, but how they’re doing in relation to blacks. If they’re positioned above blacks on the social ladder, then that’s what’s important. You have to break down that kind of perception and ask these people—the white working class, the white poor, the white unemployed—not how you are doing vis-à-vis blacks, but how you could be doing in an alternative system, in a system that’s more redistributivist for everybody.

There’s a book of a few years ago by Douglas Massey, a well-known sociologist, called *Categorically Unequal*. He had this phrase, I don’t know if he coined it, “egalitarian capitalism.” It sounds weird when you first hear it because, you know, how could there be an egalitarian capitalism? Is that like “jumbo shrimp” or “business ethics” or something like that? But his argument is that if we look at the U.S. capitalism of the 1930s to the 1970s, it’s significantly more equal than what we have now, in part because that’s covering the period from the Great Depression, through World War II, the post-war boom, and so forth. I tell my students, and they don’t believe me, because it’s really so hard to believe, that in this country, not in Swedish social democracy, under conservative Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, you had a tax rate that was as high as 91 percent. I think the top tax rate is now 40 percent or so. You had a shift from that capitalism, which was more egalitarian, which did more to spread the wealth around, and you had this systematic rolling back of progressive taxation, and you get deregulation, especially after the Reagan/Thatcher revolutions of the 1980s onwards. What this has led to is to a new Gilded Age.

Mark Twain (collaborating with Charles Warner) described the original Gilded Age in the late 19th century; we're now in the new Gilded Age with income and wealth differentials that are comparable to those of the Roaring 1920s. If you look at the United States, in comparison to the other Western democracies, this country has the greatest degree of inequality, the greatest distance between top and bottom, in terms of income and wealth. There's an incredible concentration of wealth, not merely in the top 1 percent, as is often pointed out, more like the top .01 percent or the top 1 percent of that 1 percent. We have an intense concentration of wealth up there, and stagnation for decades in many middle and working class household incomes, if you measure in real dollars, corrected for inflation. There's a recent book, a quite unlikely best seller, Thomas Piketty, a French economist, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. His argument is that the predictions that you got in the 1950s by mainstream economists, of future equalization and a fair share going to labor and capital, were quite wrong. They were based on non-representative data. In certain respects, not in every respect by any means, Marx had it right. The future that Piketty predicts is plutocracy: an increase in the concentration of wealth at the upper levels and increasing gaps between them and the rest of the population, the forthcoming long Gilded Age of the 21st century. So, what you have to do is to try to make a case to the white population, as I said those who are most vulnerable, those whose wages are stagnant, and say to them, "What do you think the future is going to be for your children, for your grandchildren, in a society like this?"

What you do is you try to incorporate the project of racial justice into a social justice project which has a class dimension.

Now, it's important to emphasize that I'm not saying you just dissolve the racial justice project in the social democratic project because historically that has not worked in this country. You go back to Franklin Roosevelt, to the 1930s, and this was the first major development of the welfare state. But because of the political influence of the South, the categories of people to be covered were constructed so as to exclude domestics and agricultural workers from benefits, which is precisely where black Americans were concentrated. From the very start you had a racialized welfare state, which is a welfare state just for whites. You can't put confidence in the fact that the welfare system will cover everybody because the



history has been that it doesn't. In recent years in particular—and there's been a lot of literature on this—the point has been made that welfare is a stigmatized category that is associated with blacks: the idea that these are folks who are trying to game the system. So, there are some people deserving of welfare, hard-working white Americans, and there are these other folks who are trying to rip off the system—they are driving Cadillacs. It's all mythical, of course. But the point is that this is a suburban mythology among whites that is very prevalent, which contributed to the dismantling of welfare under Democrat Bill Clinton.

So, you can't assume that a social democratic state alone can take care of racial justice given this history of black exclusion. You need to have racial justice as a sort of discrete component within this, recognizing that the historical processes which have led to racial injustice are not at all the same as those that have led to class injustice. We then put this case to the white working class and ask them: "What is the future for your children and grandchildren?

Why is the United States so unusual among the Western democracies? Why is the division of rich and poor so extreme here? Why is it that on so many crucial social indicators, despite all the wealth of this country, the United States ranks so low?" And you give an answer—and of course this could be controversial, but there are many black Americans over the 20th century who have endorsed it—that race has been a

If you were to get social democratic, non-white-supremacist, race inclusive capitalism, those in themselves would be radical changes, considering that U.S. capitalism from the beginning has been of a white supremacist kind.

central reason. White workers have identified as whites before they've identified as workers. Rather than a united working class pushing for a more equal system, a system that gives a chance to everybody, you find a racially divided working class because for white workers their white identity has trumped their working class identity. This historically goes back to the 19th century and early 20th century. You find white workers forming unions and keeping blacks out of unions. You find white workers moving to segregated neighborhoods and making sure that blacks are excluded. There has been no effective national working class movement.

If you look at the level of unionization in the country it's now down to about 12 percent or so. I think the high point in the 1950s was maybe 35 percent. There has been no strong national labor movement comparable to those we've had in Western Europe. There has been no strong social democratic party. This has all contributed to the fact that you have a capitalism which is so extreme, a capitalism that is headed towards consolidated plutocracy if the predictions of the people like Thomas Piketty are correct. The social democratic project, then, combined with the racial justice project—the argument would be that if you can convince enough whites to join this project and recognize a need for racial justice as well as class justice in terms of creating more of a redistributivist capitalist system, then you're not just relying on moral suasion, you're not just hoping that a justice argument will win, you're trying to combine a justice argument with an appeal to white group interests. If you can sell that case, then possibly you can get those two motivations put together to be sufficiently convincing as an argument: then you could have racial justice.

**STANCE (AS): THIS NEXT QUESTION IS IN A SENSE RELATED TO YOUR PREVIOUS ANSWER. YOU TALK A LOT ABOUT REVISING EXISTING PROBLEMATIC FRAMEWORKS TO ADAPT INTO RADICAL ENDS RATHER THAN CASTING THEM ASIDE TO BUILD SOMETHING NEW. WE MUST POINT OUT THE PROBLEMS WITHIN THE EXISTING STRUCTURES BEFORE WE CAN EFFECT CHANGE. THIS SEEMS LIKE A LOGICAL FIRST STEP, BUT IS IT THE ONLY STEP? WHAT DO WE DO AFTER WE REWORK THE SOCIAL CONTRACT? DO WE STILL KEEP CAPITALISM AROUND ONCE WE'VE SHIFTED TO A NON-WHITE-SUPREMACIST CAPITALISM, OR IS IT THEN TIME TO TEAR IT DOWN AND BUILD SOMETHING NEW?**

**CM:** If you consider the kind of capitalism we've had in the U.S., I agree it has historically been a racial capitalism, a white supremacist capitalism, that has differentially disadvantaged people of color. So, if you were to get social democratic, non-white-supremacist, race inclusive capitalism, those in themselves would be radical changes, revolutionary changes, considering that U.S. capitalism from the beginning, going back to the war of independence, has been of a white supremacist kind. That's been the history of this country: a capitalism that has been racialized.



Of course, some people have argued that you can't separate the attainment of racial justice from an anti-capitalist project because racial injustice has been so foundational to American capitalism. Even if you can separate them conceptually from an analytic point of view (as a philosopher can), causally you can't because they're so intimately tied. There's that argument. If that argument is sound, then what I just described in the previous answer is not going to work because it's too threatening to the foundation of the system itself. I assumed an optimistic perspective, that you can separate them not merely conceptually but causally. But that might be wrong. And, of course, there are also people doubtful that a green capitalism that is going to be able to adapt to the impending disaster of global warming is possible either. In both cases, the claim would be that there's a systemic dynamic intrinsic to capitalism that's going to be refractory to the necessary radical changes needed.

The problem of an anti-capitalist political project, though—and I'm not saying it's an insuperable problem, but certainly a *prima facie* problem—is that you need to be able to convince people that a post-capitalist society would both guarantee rights and be economically functional. And there's no attractive post-capitalist society on the face of the planet that meets those criteria. Karl Marx died in 1883; that's a long time ago. The People's Republic of China is now a big success economically, but it's not a democratic society, and there are all kinds of restrictions on who can participate politically. The question is how are you going to win people over when there's no attractive model to point to? These are problems that would have to be worked out. But, if you think in terms of more immediate goals—a more redistributivist capitalism, a nonracist capitalism—these are attractive targets for which there are working models. I would suggest, at least in the short term, that this is what we should be focusing on.

**STANCE (AS): IN LIGHT OF THE PIONEERING NATURE OF YOUR EARLY WORKS, AT A TIME WHEN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY WAS AND STILL IS DOMINATED BY FIRST WORLD THEORY, DID YOU EVER STRUGGLE TO BE ABLE TO DO THE KIND OF WORK YOU WANTED TO DO? DID YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF TRYING TO BALANCE YOUR WORK ON RACE WITH MORE TRADITIONAL TOPICS?**



**CM:** Most of my early work was in fact on First World theory. My dissertation was on Marxism, and I was exploring Marxist theory. In some cases it was Marx in a Caribbean context, but this is still Western theory—a radical part of Western theory, but Western theory just the same. There was still to a certain extent—this was way back in the late eighties—a publishing market for such work. Later on it became much harder to get such work published in mainstream journals because Marxism seemed to many people, on the surface, completely dead. It is true that some of my early work on race was published in non-philosophy journals, like interdisciplinary journals and Third World journals. On the other hand, just to show the important role that can be played by white philosophers with respect to race, I should mention John Deigh who was at the time the book review editor of *Ethics*, which is the most important ethics journal. John invited me to do a review essay for the journal of two books on the underclass. That in itself shows the difference that can be made by white philosophers trying self-consciously to expand the room for people of color. I had a long review essay in *Ethics* in 1994, and that shows the extent to which there were some white philosophers at the time concerned with the non-representativeness of the profession and willing to do what they could to help change things. So, a shout-out to John. Now, of course, it is somewhat easier to publish because critical philosophy of race, even if it's not mainstream, is more respectable.

**STANCE (AS): THIS NEXT QUESTION IS MULTI-FACETED, SO IF YOU WANT TO TAKE IT PIECE BY PIECE THAT'S FINE. HOW DOES YOUR WORK ACCOUNT FOR INTERDISCRIMINATION AMONGST DIFFERING NONWHITE GROUPS: FOR EXAMPLE, TENSION AMONGST BLACK AMERICANS AND LATINOS IN CERTAIN AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES? WOULD HORIZONTALLY DIRECTED DISCRIMINATION BE A PROPER WAY OF THINKING ABOUT THIS TYPE OF HOSTILITY, OR DOES THE TENSION BETWEEN DIFFERING NONWHITE GROUPS ALWAYS ARISE FROM A DOMINATIVE WHITE SUPREMACY? WHAT TYPE OF INITIAL EPISTEMIC ISSUES DO YOU THINK NEED TO BE ADDRESSED FOR VARYING MINORITY GROUPS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT EACH OTHER'S TESTIMONIES AND MOVE TOWARDS A FRUITFUL AND COALITIONAL CONVERSATION?**



**CM:** It's important not to confuse a terminological unifying term with a unified reality. "Nonwhite" and "people of color" are convenient umbrella terms. But they cover groups with radically divergent histories and interests, and there's no reason to think that there's a natural alliance of the different "races" under this umbrella. We're all human. Insofar as people are trying to get larger shares of a social product, white supremacy will play a certain kind of role insofar as society has been more controlled by whites historically. But it would be a mistake to locate all the blame upwards. We're all prone to racism. We're all prone to racist sentiments. It's important not to romanticize the oppressed. It's important not to think, "These poor oppressed guys are going to get into power and everything's going to be different because they're going to be forged by their oppression to be saintly people." It doesn't work like that. Often it's the case that people have been so shaped by oppression that their aim is to do to others what has been done to them. It's really important to be realistic about this kind of thing and not to have a romantic and naïve idea about social dynamics. That doesn't mean you shouldn't work for social justice, because of course you should. But you need to understand the dangers and tensions in all these processes.

These dangers bring home all the more why you need a principled commitment to racial justice that does not degenerate into interest group politics. Interest group politics just means you have race R1 as the dominant race and R2s, R3s, and R4s that have been subordinated, and it then becomes a battle between the R2s, R3s, R4s and R1s for larger shares of the pie. That's not what you want. What you want is some attempt, objectively from a moral point of view, to say, "Well, okay, whose opportunities have been affected in this context? Who deserves corrective justice in this other context?" You try to adjudicate them and bring them together. Obviously, this is really difficult and complicated, but all the more reason for philosophers to start taking a stand on these issues. It's going to mean a recognition of legitimate interests including white interests. It's not the case that you can say those are white people, so that's white supremacy, so we're going to ignore them. No. Everybody's legitimate racial interests need to be taken into account. What you want is a racial justice that is objective,

**It's important not to romanticize the oppressed.**

not a racial justice that is basically just catering to whichever racial group seems to have more power.

In terms of a more fruitful conversation, that will only be able to take place in a framework sensitive to diverse racial histories. There has been an increasing body of work in critical philosophy of race lately talking about the importance of moving beyond what's called the black-white paradigm. The black-white paradigm historically has been that you have from the start in the U.S. three groups: reds, whites, and blacks. You have white settlers, you have indigenous Native Americans, and blacks are mostly slaves. These are the three basic races. Then, with the eventual outcome of the Indian Wars, the conquest of the Native Americans, they're forced onto reservations, they no longer play such a role in the national racial dynamics, because they're sequestered on reservations rather than being an ongoing major factor. Then you get a shift where the major dialectic becomes the white-black dialectic, and you get what is called the black-white paradigm because it seems you can understand all other races and ethnic groups on this model. But the problem is that practices of racism against Native Americans, racism against Latinos, racism against Asian Americans, have distinct features of their own. The stereotypes differ, the particular histories differ—the history of Native Americans who are here from the start, the history of mass Asian immigration that starts much later than African slave labor, stimulating anti-Asian sentiment and anti-Asian immigration law—these are all different histories and different racial positionings. You need to develop a sophisticated understanding of racism that's going to be sensitive to these diverse histories. On this basis you then try to establish a framework for principled dialogue among people who can recognize these diverse histories.

**STANCE (AS): I THINK THAT WAS A GOOD POINT YOU MADE ABOUT CONCENTRATING ON THIS OVERALL PICTURE AND MOVING AWAY FROM THE BLACK-WHITE PARADIGM.**

**CM:** Yes, I also wanted to mention the point that Linda Martín Alcoff has made in her work. She's a well-known theorist of race. She points out that it's also going to affect the building of coalitions. If R2s are insensitive to the problems of R3s, it's going to be hard to convince R3s to want to join them in coalition. Apart from a principled basis for it, from a moral point of view, there's also a



political basis for it. This thing is never going to get off the ground if people are not sufficiently aware of and sensitive to the differing racial histories and the different racial wrongs that have been done unto groups. There's both a principled moral racial justice reason and also a pragmatic, political reason in terms of being able to form these groups into a coalition in the first place.

**STANCE (AS): THANK YOU. YOU MENTIONED IN *BLACKNESS VISIBLE* THAT IT WAS A PREPARATION FOR THE TEACHING OF YOUR FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY COURSE THAT CAUSED YOU TO REFLECT ON THE ROLE OF RACE IN PHILOSOPHY IN A MORE IN-DEPTH AND SYSTEMATIC PERSPECTIVE. SINCE THAT INITIAL COURSE, HOW HAVE YOUR STUDENTS' QUESTIONS REGARDING THIS TOPIC AND INTERACTIONS AND ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE TOPIC DEVELOPED OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF DECADES?**

**CM:** I think my answer to that is the shortest of all because there hasn't been that much change. Race is still a fringe subject in the field, and, even if there is more literature than there previously would have been, the students who come to these classes will not necessarily have read it. In many cases, when you teach an undergrad course, students will never have done this in a philosophy course before. Sometimes you feel that you're making the same initial points over and over again. For example, "Why is this legitimately philosophical in the first place?" as against sociological or some other thing like that. I would not say that there has been a dramatic change in the kind of questions I have been asked.

**STANCE (AS): MUCH OF YOUR WORK FOCUSES ON MAKING INDIVIDUALS CONSCIOUS OF RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION, BUT COLOR-BLINDNESS IS NOT A DESIRABLE ALTERNATIVE AS EXEMPLIFIED BY MAINSTREAM PHILOSOPHY. HOW DO YOU PUT A POSITIVE SPIN ON IDENTITIES THAT HAVE HISTORICALLY OPPRESSED INDIVIDUALS, OR, IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT ARE THE RIGHT WAYS TO ATTEND TO RACE?**

**CM:** Different positions have emerged on this question. The question is: white identity historically has been tied up with social oppression, so what's an appropriate response? Do you say that white identity needs to be given up because it's inextricably tied up

with this history of oppression? Or do you say that white identity needs to be reclaimed, to be redeemed for a progressive anti-racist agenda? Interesting work has been done on this subject by Linda Alcoff, whom I mentioned in answer to a previous question, and also Shannon Sullivan, a philosopher originally at Penn State, now at North Carolina Charlotte, and George Yancy. Linda has a forthcoming book, *The Future of Whiteness*; Shannon has published *Revealing Whiteness* and, more recently, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*. George is a very prolific anthologist; he's edited at least fifteen books so far, and some of them have specifically brought together white philosophers as a group weighing in on the topic as white persons, as white philosophers. I think his most recent one is *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-Racism*. So, philosophers are exploring these issues.

One argument is that, in a racialized society such as the United States, everyone is going to have an ascribed racial identity. It's not up to you to decide what your race is. There are borderline cases such as the long history of those black people who were light enough to pass, and some of those people did pass. You cross over into the white community and sever relations with your own family. So, there are a few borderline cases where people can choose their own races in that sense. But, for the most part, your race is chosen by others. Your race is determined for you by social decisions. A white person cannot individually choose to give up their race. It doesn't really mean anything from a social point of view. They will still have white racial privilege and what comes with that.

Some people have argued, and this is the position of, as I said, Linda Alcoff and Shannon Sullivan, that a better approach is to try to use that privilege in a constructive way. You recognize that whiteness has been tied up with social oppression, but you also recognize that there's been a white anti-racist tradition. There's been a tradition of anti-imperialism, a tradition of anti-slavery, a tradition of anti-Jim Crow. It's been a subordinate tradition; if it had been the major one, then we wouldn't have had these problems! But it's not been nonexistent. So, as a progressive white person concerned about these issues, one answer has been that you educate yourself about the history of race, you educate yourself about whiteness, you educate yourself about the white anti-racist tradition, and you locate yourself within that tradition, helping to build a racial justice



movement. It shouldn't be white against nonwhite; we don't want a race war or anything like that. It should be people of all colors who are concerned about racial justice, against those, unfortunately, who are not concerned about racial justice and help to keep things as they are. What you do want is a broad coalition of people, and you can see this in the protests against Ferguson as it was clear on TV and looking at the demonstrators that there are many whites involved in these protests. I like the fact that an increasing number of young white people in particular, who have not been socialized in the traditions of their parents and grandparents, recognize these problems and will, I hope, help to provide part of the social transformative role, making it clear that this should not be a white versus nonwhite thing. It should be a racial justice issue, including people of all colors and all races.

**STANCE (AS): WHAT DO MORE PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO SEE THE RADICAL REORGANIZATION OF RACE AS A NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE GOAL, NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE RACIAL CONTRACT FOR THEM TO HARNESS HOPE AND SUPPORT FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE?**

**CM:** A positive aspect of the history would be that, as you note above, race is constructed. I've been using "race" throughout not in the biological sense—which I, along with many other people, don't think exists—but race as a social construct. A nonracial world existed once. That gives us some hope that a nonracial world may exist again. There is also the thought that racialized society that privileges one race at the expense of others is a morally unjust society, and for some people that may act as a motivation or stimulation to join a social justice movement. But, as I said in reply to your earlier question, it may be that moral suasion will have a limited role, that what we need to count on is the mobilization of white group interests as well as moral motivation.

One potentially positive possibility some people are counting on is the impending demographic shift. But it's a complicated question. Some people predict that by around 2040 or so we'll have shifted to a majority nonwhite USA for the first time in U.S. history. But part of the complication is this: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a well-known sociologist of race at Duke, has argued that the U.S. is moving towards a Latin model. If you compare racial systems globally, the

U.S. system has usually been set in sharp contrast with the Latin American systems, so much so that some Latin American nations—Brazil is a famous example—claim they're racial democracies. You know, "We're the good guys. The bad U.S., they have race problems. We don't have race problems." This is complete nonsense. But it was made semi-believable because the nature of race in these

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countries is different. It has not usually been a sort of clear-cut, white-supremacist system. It's been much more of a continuum of shades, "pigmentocracy" in a famous term. In Brazil, for example, people who would all count as black in the U.S. because of the one-drop rule (any black ancestry makes you black) are categorized in a spectrum of different shades, different shades of brown. In fact, many people would not want to be identified as black. They would see that designation as inappropriate,

indeed as impolite and insulting. It's been part of the difficulty, in fact, of getting a racial justice movement off the ground there. One advantage of the one-drop rule in the U.S. is that everybody's united by it. Even if you were a light-skinned black, that didn't matter: you were still categorized as black under Jim Crow.

Eduardo's belief is that if the U.S. were to move toward this system, one of the consequences would be a re-drawing of the boundaries of whiteness. In the past there were some people who argued that European ethnics were not originally white in the U.S. There's a famous book in critical race theory by Noel Ignatiev called *How the Irish Became White*. There's a related book by Karen Brodtkin called *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. Other people say these are misleading characterizations and it's not that the Irish were nonwhite, it's not that Jews were nonwhite, it's that there was a hierarchy of white races—we shouldn't see whiteness as a monolith. In the late 19th and early 20th century whiteness was conceived of as covering different white races. European ethnics, so-called (now), generally came from the



east and south—Jews, Slavs, Italians, Greeks—these were members of inferior white races (as seen then), as against the Anglo Saxons of the north and west.

And then there's a transition that even if you concede these groups were whites, but inferior whites, their status changes. It changes in part because of postwar suburbanization. Originally you have clearly demarcated ethnic neighborhoods: there's a Greek town and an Italian town and so forth. Whereas in the suburbs everybody's sort of mixed up—and when I say everybody, I mean whites because they are the original suburban dwellers; in the postwar period suburbs were almost exclusively white. You then get a dissolution of boundaries of white ethnicity and an expansion into a white race that is now conceived of much more uniformly than it would have been fifty years before. This brings home to us the possibility of changes in the boundaries of whiteness, or you could say to a full whiteness from a more inferior whiteness. We could move towards a situation where Euro-Latinos, Latinos of a European background, who would currently be seen because of ethnicity as not white in the traditional Anglo sense, the boundaries could be redrawn to include them. Some people have argued that some Asian groups like Japanese and Chinese, maybe South Asians, that they are already seen as (a phrase somebody used was) “probationary whites.” If you consider these possibilities, if you see whiteness not as biological but as a social construct, which can be constructed in different ways, you then have the possibility of an expansion of whiteness that will bring in some of these groups so that the shift to a nonwhite majority would not in fact take place, because Latinos are the largest “minority” ethnic group in the U.S.

Not all Latinos are of European origin, of course: there are Afro-Latinos, there are Indo-Latinos, there are people who are mixed, mestizo and mulatto. But, insofar as a significant section of the Latino population here has a Euro-Latino background, if whiteness expands to include them, you could see—maybe together with some Asians, maybe some light-skinned blacks—how it could be the case that you'd continue to have a system of racial disadvantage where the boundaries are now drawn differently. It would continue to be the case that those who are at the bottom would be darker, dark-skinned blacks, Indo-Latinos, Afro-Latinos, less privileged Asian groups such as Vietnamese and so forth. You would then have a different kind of racial system, which was still an unfair one.



So, in terms of the hope of the 2040 demographic shift being a positive thing for racial justice, you need to bear in mind that it won't necessarily happen that way. It could actually be changing the boundaries of whiteness rather than minoritizing whiteness.

The second point is that even if the boundary lines remain the same and whites do become a minority, they will still have differential power because of history. They will have a lot of cultural influence, they will have bureaucratic influence, they will have political influence, and of course they will have economic influence. There's a huge differential between the wealth of the median white household and the median black and Latino household. Even if whites do become a minority, they will still have differential power in the country for a long time. So, that's a complicated answer, and I'm basically trying to say that there are some positive signs, but there are some negative signs as well, which is why you can't just expect to sit back and think that the natural course of events is going to lead to racial justice, because it won't. It's going to need people to be active. It's going to need people to be committed. It's going to need people to self-consciously think about these issues and ask what kind of a country do we want to live in.

**STANCE (AS): CERTAINLY. IT'S IMPORTANT TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT HOW THE RACIAL CONTRACT MIGHT CONTINUE TO REVISE ITSELF OVER TIME. THIS ALSO TIES INTO THE NEXT QUESTION, WHICH IS, IN YOUR BOOK *THE RACIAL CONTRACT*, AMONG OTHER WORKS, YOU DISCUSS HOW THE RACIAL CONTRACT IS A NON-IDEAL POLITY THAT'S CONSTANTLY BEING RE-WRITTEN DEPENDING ON THE ERA AND ITS LOCATION. WHICH PROBLEMS ENGENDERED BY THE CURRENT MANIFESTATION OR SPECIFIC INSTANTIATION OF THIS NON-IDEAL POLITY ARE YOU CURRENTLY MOST INTERESTED IN?**

**CM:** Well, it's one that's most obvious, which is white refusal to see racial injustice and racial inequality as stemming from oppression. In the book I use the phrase "an epistemology of ignorance." I've done philosophical work on white ignorance. It's really interesting as a philosophical issue—one can be detached and academic about it, and there's a lot of writing in cognitive psychology to help us understand such phenomena, but of course we need to bear in mind



always that this is not merely an abstract, technical issue, but one with deep and problematic social effects. But that's a really interesting question: how is it possible to be in this society, aware of huge racial disparities and all these racially divergent social indicators, and not see that there's a racial problem? That's a real challenge.

There's a famous quote from Du Bois's 1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* where he likens the situation of blacks trying to reach out to an indifferent and impassive white population to being behind a thick wall of plate glass that blocks out sound, and he expresses vividly there the frustration of that inability to make cognitive and affective contact with the white population. We're obviously in a very different world from the one in which he lived, considering the progress that has been made since then. Nonetheless, that has been an ongoing problem. People who benefit from privilege develop a cognitive adjustment by virtue of which they do not see the privilege as privilege. In comparison to this time period in particular, you could say more effort would have been required in Du Bois's time not to see privilege, considering that Jim Crow was then the law of the land. Now, you have a black president in the White House, somebody who was elected not once but twice. This is an intellectual, political, and moral challenge: how do you reach this white population who are convinced that racial justice has, if not completely, been achieved—and as long as there are events like Ferguson I guess such convictions may be somewhat disrupted—and that we've really come quite far.

How is it possible to be in this society, aware of huge racial disparities and all these racially divergent social indicators, and not see that there's a racial problem?

The problem is that a lot of people, maybe it's even an innate human cognitive tendency, use a metric by which you look back: "Look how far we've progressed from slavery, look how far we've progressed from Jim Crow, a black guy in the White House." If that's your measuring stick, then obviously progress has been made. The real measuring stick should be, "How far are we from racial equality? What would racial equality require?" But it's very easy to look backwards and say, "Well, hey, it's clear we're making progress,

and if we keep on as we do we will continue to make progress.” When, in fact, there are some social indicators that are actually going backward. The wealth differential, at least since the government has started to collect figures on it, is worse than it’s ever been. The percentage of people of color in prison is worse than it has ever been. You had partial desegregation in the seventies and eighties; but it has been resegregation since then. This is 2014—the sixtieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision—and many parts of the country are now more segregated educationally than they were in the time of *Brown*. Nonetheless, for too large a percentage of the white population, this is not seen as a problem. That, I think, is a major obstacle facing everybody who is interested in racial justice. From a philosophical point of view, the point of view of social epistemology and cognitive psychology, that’s a really interesting question.

**STANCE (AS): YES, SO IN A SENSE YOU COULD SAY IT’S A MATTER OF EXPOSING THE INTANGIBLE AND THE UNSEEN?**

**CM:** Except there’s a lot of stuff that is seen. How can those in segregated communities not see that they live in an almost all-white environment? Or think of the Katrina disaster and the things that were “seen” then. But there’s this capacity of whiteness to recuperate, rewrite, gloss over, so that even if the equilibrium is temporarily disturbed, it returns to the equilibrium point.

**STANCE (AS): WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN YOUR WORK AND ACTIVISM, AND HOW SHOULD PEOPLE PUT YOUR IDEAS INTO PRACTICE?**

**CM:** Well, there is standard stuff. People have formed study groups to develop their understanding of race or to understand the history of racial domination in the country. Arm yourselves with the facts; arm yourself with knowledge of the actual history. There’s a huge amount of ignorance on race in the United States, as I just said. A lot of the things that many whites believe are just completely false, completely divergent from the way things actually were and are. So, overcoming white ignorance should be a goal, both in yourself, if you’re white, and in people of color who have been socialized into the white viewpoint as well, insofar as there are hegemonic white-sanitized texts in high school and university. In terms of activism, people can find out what the local issues are and get involved in



them, or if they have the temperament, and of course only a few people have this kind of temperament, get involved in national issues. You can take positions, sign petitions, give money to the appropriate causes, write your congressperson, protest. There are all kinds of issues of segregated education, racial profiling, the disproportionately nonwhite prison population, patterns of police shootings—there are all kinds of things on which if more whites took an activist stand it would be harder to see them as non-issues. If it's only or largely people of color who are taking a stand on these issues, it's easier for the majority white population to dismiss them. You really need a significant section of the white population to see these as racial justice issues about which everybody should be concerned.

**STANCE (AS): HAVE YOU EVER CO-AUTHORED AN ARTICLE WITH AN UNDERGRADUATE, AND WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SHOULD PLAY IN THE FIELD OF PHILOSOPHY?**

**CM:** No, I'm afraid not. But I think it can play a valuable role to facilitate the transition to graduate work. One is challenging oneself by doing a self-sustained piece of intellectual work. And it's also very valuable in itself. It's not merely the case that it has instrumental value for your own development; it can actually generate new knowledge. I had an undergraduate student two years ago who did a very interesting undergraduate dissertation about racism on the Internet. The original vision, the promise of the Internet, was that it's a place where your body, your identity, becomes irrelevant. We know from hate sites that this has not at all turned out to be the case. The thesis was a very interesting piece of work documenting this reality and looking at the shift in perception from the original utopian vision of the Internet to the way things have actually turned out.

**STANCE (AS): OUR LAST QUESTION: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR UNDERGRADUATES CURRENTLY PURSUING PHILOSOPHY, AND WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU HAVE LIKED TO HAVE RECEIVED UPON BEGINNING YOUR CAREER?**

**CM:** Well, for anybody considering graduate work, I'm afraid the situation is now pretty bad. There's a famous statistic, which I can't remember exactly: it's either 75 percent of all college and university

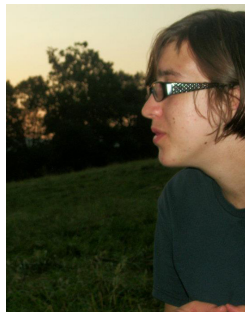
courses are being taught by temps or 75 percent of all college and university teachers are temps. Which, either way, is obviously not encouraging. The grand days of an expanding university system and lots of tenure-track jobs available—they're not around anymore. On the other hand, an undergrad degree in philosophy is valuable, even if you don't go on to grad school in philosophy, because there are a lot of statistics that show that people with philosophy majors do very well in adapting to other professions. It cultivates a particular skill set: you learn to think analytically, you learn to challenge the arguments of others and construct your own arguments, you learn to identify the particular conceptual framework a person is working with and how to challenge that. Apart from the classic cultivation of wisdom, teaching you to think very deeply about your life and what you want to do with your life, philosophy also has an instrumental side to it that's very conducive to getting a job in other areas.

**Arm yourselves with the facts; arm yourself with knowledge of the actual history.**

In terms of advice I was given myself, they distributed a statement to all of us in my first year in graduate school at the University of Toronto warning us that the golden age of job expansion was past and that we should not think that the PhD would, if we did indeed finish the program, necessarily result in a job. So there is a sense in which this has been a problem for a long time. But I think it's even worse now than it was then. What you might think is, "Well, that's the other guy. They won't make it, but I will." In my particular case, I did make it, but luck played a large role in my eventually finding a job. So, I would suggest to all of you that you do need to think very seriously before going on to graduate school and make sure you get advice about it from informed people.



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