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Is Philosophy Anything if it Isn't White?

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That philosophy is a very white field seems obvious. In the U.S., most of the texts philosophers use have been written by white authors and the vast majority of professional philosophers are white. But is philosophy's whiteness an essential quality? What kind of existence would philosophy have if it weren't white? And how is its whiteness related to racism?

There isn't a word in Vietnamese for philosophy. And yet in Vietnam, people think rigorously, they have discursive means of resolving disputes, they contemplate the nature of the universe, of knowledge, of human action, and of politics.[1]

During one quarter, in my critical thinking class, a Vietnamese student spoke up and said that if he were to argue the way I was suggesting within a Vietnamese context, he would be rejected for being rude. Several other Vietnamese students chimed in in agreement. Is there anything universal about the value of engaging in conversation about ideas through trying to refute the other person's ideas? Does it matter that a person from a non-Western background must let go of some dearly held cultural practices to succeed in a philosophy classroom? To what extent do our students code switch, and use philosophy instrumentally to help them survive in Western dominant contexts? To what extent is philosophy a virus for spreading Eurocentrism?

The derivation of the term philosophy from the Greek "love of wisdom" points to a wide-open field of possibilities for the reflection on all sorts of things, using all sorts of approaches. And yet, the term "philosophy" is usually understood to have a far narrower reference. A trip to almost any dictionary will find something like the following from the Oxford English Dictionary: philosophy is "love, study, or pursuit (through argument or reason) of wisdom, truth or knowledge." One can imagine a deeply multiracial and multicultural philosophy that was based on studying, investigating, comparing and analyzing, using a variety of methods, the forms of wisdom that arise in a rich variety of cultural contexts. Such a philosophy would not have to be "white," nor would it have to be racist.

But stuck in the middle of the OED's wide definition is one of the fulcrums for maintaining and reproducing the whiteness of Philosophy. The parenthesis that limits philosophy to pursuit "through argument or reason" expresses a limit on philosophy that many see as crucial to its definition. How notions of reason and argumentation are conceptualized is a core node from which much of the whiteness of philosophy emanates.[2]

The boundaries of those concepts are policed vigilantly and with severity. In my experience, those trying to question dominant forms of rationality are regularly met with reactions which violate the expressed norms of rational discourse: rather than being open to being swayed by the force of the better argument, our interlocutors often become stiff, defensive, and dismissive. Positions that question dominant notions of the rational are mocked and rejected through name-calling. Papers that make arguments for alternative approaches to reason are rarely accepted in major journals, and people who hold those positions are regularly denied tenure.

The battle to maintain the whiteness of philosophy is raging in often quiet ways, in philosophy departments, in journals, at conferences, in classrooms. Those working to maintain the whiteness of philosophy often have no idea that this is what they are doing. And yet the cultural work of creating and maintaining forms of cultural hegemony is being done every day in decisions about what texts to teach, how to interpret them, who to listen to, who to dismiss, and how we argue with one another.

There are many situations in which people, when presented with new information, will change their views, or at least consider new ideas in a relaxed and open way. But other ideas can send these same, generally open, people into what looks like a state of panic. Under these circumstances, suddenly the affect changes from relaxed engagement to a defensive combative pose, suddenly attempted refutations are thrown out at a rapid pace without much consideration, the intellectual level of the conversation drops to a surprisingly low level. Personal insults are likely to fly, and all of the norms of good argumentation are thrown out the window.

What I believe is happening in these cases is that the person defending mainstream approaches to philosophy has been thrown into a state of panic by their perception that a core pillar of their sense of self is about to be challenged. If what they are being told is true, then their sense of self will be rocked. Their sense of themselves as smart, because they are "smarter" than someone else, and their sense of security that they have a method that is reliable, and their sense of themselves as special, because they are part of a culture that is "superior," will be vulnerable to being challenged. We spend years in school accumulating cultural capital, and if what we learned was wrong or in need of being decentered, then we are not as well-educated as we were before. Our value on the cultural market will have declined.

Martin Bernal argues that much of the really serious work of creating philosophy as a white discipline happened in the 19th century when self-consciously racist people reinterpreted historical texts in ways that wrote any-

thing black, Egyptian, or Mesopotamian out of our understanding of the history.[3] At that time, the superiority of the European tradition was asserted, argued for, and defended. Those of us working in the present time have been handed a tradition with serious racism embedded in it, and unless we undo that work of the 19th century, we will be carrying on their racist work.

Any questioning of the superiority of the Western cannon puts in question the superiority of those of us constructed as part of the West. And while it is often white males of upper class backgrounds who can easily adopt this mantle, many people of color, working class people and women, have been allowed membership in the club of the West, and have not wanted to give up the sense of self that comes from being constituted by the so-called greatest lineage in the history of the world.[4]

Rationality has played an important role in helping to maintain the notion of European superiority. It is a placeholder term. As a short hand for "good thinking" it can be used to distinguish ways of thinking that are approved from ways of thinking that are to be rejected. As a core term of judgment within the Western tradition, it has powerful rhetorical force for doing the cultural work of creating hegemonic tools that can be used to create the distinctions that help to provide the intellectual underpinnings to perpetuate racism within Western culture.

Among other possibilities, rationality can refer to thought that is logical, thought that is non-emotional, and thought that leads to progress. In each of these uses, rationality functions as a measuring stick to judge the validity of ways of thinking. And yet, in each case, there is an insufficiency to the grounding of the measuring stick. In each case the insufficiency leaves open a space into which whiteness often gets braided deeply into the concept of rationality. This chapter will explore three different uses of ideas of "rationality" to see how the whiteness of philosophy is both constituted and hidden. The following sections look at rationality as logic, rationality as non-emotional, and rationality as Habermas' universal reason.

Philosophy's whiteness is not just a problem for philosophy, or for people of color who would like to be "philosophers." Philosophy plays an important cultural role as the discourse on discourse,[5] as the master key to the master narrative. And if we are able to disrupt the circuits through which rationality positions white thinkers as superior, we help transform widely circulating cultural logics that rely on these philosophical conceptions. And so increasing our ability to interrupt hegemonizing uses of rationality within philosophy, we can also weaken the racism inherent in dominant ways that the world is understood in the West and increasingly around the world.

Rationality as Logic

When we talk about thought that is rational, for many people that means thought that is logical. Claims of an idea or a system of thinking being "logical" are of-

ten used in imprecise ways. People will charge others with being illogical when they merely disagree with their conclusions, the assumptions they are using to begin their argument, or when they don't like the ways that they are reasoning. Rarely do people making this charge actually mean that a person has violated a rule of deductive reasoning in their thinking. The charge that thinking is illogical carries heavy rhetorical force, but often with little philosophical grounding.

When philosophers are pushed to be more precise in making distinctions between the logical and the illogical they usually rely heavily on the law of non-contradiction. Since Aristotle, the law of non-contradiction has been taken in Western philosophy to be the cornerstone of rational inquiry, and the core principle for distinguishing logical from illogical thought. The law of non-contradiction is taken to be the most basic principle of deductive logic, and its use is often taken to distinguish logical thought from illogical, and good thought from bad. The claim that a discursive practice is logical or illogical has also been used in problematic ways to denigrate the thinking of non-white people and indeed of whole cultures.

This denigration is enabled by equivocation, enacted frequently by philosophers and the public more broadly, on the question of whether the rules of logic apply when one is practicing formal deductive logic, or whether they can be applied outside of that domain. If you were constructing a proof using deductive logic, then it would be wrong to accept as valid a conclusion that included a contradiction (both A and not-A). That would be a violation of the rules of the game of deductive logic.

But is it correct to reject, as Aristotle seems to do, Heraclitus' "We step and do not step into the same rivers?" Is Heraclitus being illogical and irrational, or is he making a statement outside the domain of deductive reasoning? In rejecting Heraclitus, Aristotle means to reject as incorrect thinking that does not accord with the law of non-contradiction.

And, yet Aristotle himself accepts the fact that he can offer no solid grounding for the law of non-contradiction. Aristotle writes:

> There are some who, as we said, both themselves assert that it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be, and say that people can judge this to be the case. And among others many writers about nature use this language. But we have posited that it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not be, and by this means have shown that this is the most indisputable of all principles. Some indeed demand that even this shall be demonstrated, but this they do through want of education. For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything.[6]

The law of non-contradiction has been used to powerful effect in the development of Western logic, and Western philosophy more broadly. The language game that is deductive logic has been used to powerful effect through the history of Western philosophy and Western science.[7] Even if logic is not a self-grounding practice, we can still appreciate its power as a way of organizing

thought: we can accept it as a useful language game, in the sense that Ludwig Wittgenstein uses that term. Logic, like chess, offers a set of rules which, once accepted, can be used to distinguish objectively better from objectively worse moves, but whose rules, like those of chess cannot themselves be objectively validated. The "objectivity" obtains within the game, but cannot be used to judge other games.

If we understand logic this way, we can still play its game, to much good effect. But if we understand logic as a valued language game then we should be careful in how we understand the relationship between this language game and others.

At my college, when our curriculum committee instituted a new policy that classes should contain perspectives from multiple cultures where possible, the most powerful members of the philosophy department reacted with outrage when asked if we could make our logic classes reflect multicultural perspectives. Surely logic is simply logic. It isn't a cultural practice, and so there are not multiple cultural approaches to it. I found that claim so fascinating that I began to investigate.

In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* there are entries for Indian logic, Arabic logic, and Chinese logic.[8] Arabic logic is an important part of Western logic, and does not constitute an independent tradition. A multicultural approach to logic would need to mention the history of logic and in that history give due attention to the contributions from Arabic thinkers. Chinese and Indian logic appear to be largely independent traditions. In both of those traditions, people have attempted to reduce thought to its most basic rules, and to use those rules to judge the validity of statements.

Around 200 C.E. the Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna developed a deeply complex system of philosophy based on Buddhism and logical argumentation. Nagarjuna used *reductio ad absurdum* to challenge the views of his opponents, but he also employed paradox in complex ways, seeming to both accept and not accept the law of non-contradiction. For Nagarjuna what we would take to be standard rules for deductive reasoning hold for the everyday material world. But when asking deeper questions about the nature of ontology, contradiction is required. Nagarjuna uses the tetralemma, widely accepted in Indian rhetoric and logic, according to which any statement has 4 possible truth-values:

S is P
S is not-P
S is both P and not-P
S is neither P nor not-P.

According to Graham Priest and Jay L. Garfield:

Indian epistemology and metaphysics, including Buddhist epistemology and metaphysics, typically partitions each problem space defined by a property into four possibilities, not two. So Nagarjuna in *Molamadhyamakak* considers the possibility that motion, for instance is in the moving object, not in the moving

object, both in and not in the moving object, and neither in nor not in the moving object. Each prima facie logical possibility needs analysis before rejection.[9]

Similarly the Jains developed a tool for analyzing discourse using the doctrine of sevenfold predication (sapta-bhangi-naya):

1. Positive Attribution
2. Negative Attribution
3. Positive and negative attribution
4. Inexpressibility
5. Positive attributions and inexpressibility
6. Negative attributions and inexpressibility
7. Positive attributions, negative attributions, and inexpressibility.

Using this and a few other techniques, they developed elaborate ways of analyzing discourse, and were very interested in including notions of the multiplicity of perspective in their reasoning.

These Indian thinkers are doing something that looks quite a bit like Western deductive logic, and yet both systems allow for the analysis of statements that do not accord with the law of non-contradiction.

Much Chinese thinking, especially in the Taoist and Buddhist traditions, is fascinated with the complex nature of contradiction. When the Taoist Lao Tzu writes that we must "do by not doing"[10] he is not being irrational. He is making a profound statement, which, like Heraclitus' statement above, attempts to get at a truth, which is difficult to render straightforwardly. Paradox is used here to point to a truth beyond the literal meaning.[11]

It is possible when encountering a statement like Lao Tzu's to reject his philosophy as irrational. One can also simply put it aside as poetry rather than philosophy. But Taoism begins from the assumption that there is something philosophically important about exploring seemingly contradictory statements.

Some who have looked into this debate have taken the Chinese and Indian approaches to contradiction to prove that, however interesting what they were doing was, it was not logic, since by definition logic is founded on the law of noncontradiction. The claim then becomes tautological: logic is based on the law of noncontradiction, and anyone not using the law of noncontradiction is not doing logic. And the fact that all logic uses the law of noncontradiction proves that logic has a universal nature.

There is much to be learned from studying the logical systems that arose in these very different traditions. As Western thinkers are increasingly interested in understanding the nature of ambiguity, change, and the relations of parts to wholes, it is likely that there are some valuable insights to be learned from an investigation of Chinese and Indian approaches to contradiction.

Claims of being logical can mask attempts to put forward as superior one's own cultural ways over the cultural ways of others. In academic philosophy, logic is often used as a gate for separating the real philosophers from those who

should be weeded out. Feminists have made a strong case that logic is often deployed in ways that keep women from being interested in philosophy.[12] Philosophers and supporters of the dominant culture routinely reject the ideas of others as illogical. This charge carries a powerful rhetorical force, and part of that force derives from the vague belief that certain ways of being in the world are superior because they are based on more logical ways of thinking.

Logic is often taken as a cornerstone to the ways of thinking that have led to the ascendance of the West, politically, technologically, scientifically, and culturally. When rationality is equated with the logical, and when logic is a cultural particular masquerading as a universal, we have a vortex scrambling our thinking about the reasoning process.

In this confusion, a variety of prejudices are often enabled and given legitimacy. Thinking that works with paradox is disparaged. Thinking that is highly attuned to context and ambiguity are often rejected. Ways of understanding the world that begin from a unity of the emotional, spiritual, and material domains are rejected out of hand. The cultural assumptions that underlie dominant Western ways of understanding the world are dogmatically understood as linked with logical, and therefore "good," reasoning. And all of this without any sound philosophical grounding.

Rationality as Dispassionate

A second common place where the concept of rationality is used in ways that constitute and hide whiteness is around the notion that reason is a form of clear thinking that we can tap into when we shut out the confusions that arise from our bodies.

Plato is an important source for the idea that the body is a source of error in our thinking. In *The Republic,* Plato writes:

> Now children, women, and slaves, and (among so-called men) the rabble who constitute the majority of the population are the ones who evidently experience the greatest quantity and variety of forms of desire, pleasure, and pain . . . . Whereas simple and moderate forms, which are guided by the rational mind with its intelligence and true beliefs, are encountered only in those few people who have been endowed with excellence by their nature and their education.[13]

Later in this section Plato distinguishes passions, which can drive us to good things from emotion, which he conceptualizes as something like impulses, and which always lead us astray. In *The Symposium,* Plato elaborates a rich and complex notion of the relationship between reason and emotion. Our desire for a lover who is a good truth loving person will inspire our search for truth. The physical side of Eros starts us on a process of exploration that leads to a love of wisdom: or philosophy. In *The Republic,* passion is spoken of as potentially positive[14] and indeed as crucial to the pursuit of philosophy: a passion for wis-

dom. But that passion is limited, and it is clearly distinguished from emotions as a whole.

Feminists have argued that many emotions are crucial to good thinking. Good ethical reasoning requires care. The search for wisdom requires a passion for wisdom. The intuition that there is a problem drives inquiry and critique. But much of the Western tradition has followed Plato in a fairly crude way by leaving out the complexity of his notion of passion, and in seeing emotions as nothing more than impulse, and hence as nothing but impediments to good thinking. Reason is taken as the Other of emotion, and one is good where the other is bad.

The negative value judgments put on emotion and the body, as the source of emotion, are then imposed on people whose social roles put them more in touch with their physical being. Women and members of the laboring classes are seen in Plato and Aristotle as inferior and unable to pursue philosophy well because of their immersion in the concerns of the body.[15] The ancient idea that the poor cannot do philosophy has been transposed through the history of slavery and colonialism into a widespread cultural rejection of the humanity of people of color.[16]

Many authors have explored the psychodynamics of what happens for dominant forms of Western consciousness as privileged people suppress their own bodily passions, such as eroticism, and project that repressed material onto others.[17] Suddenly the world is populated by rational, dispassionate, philosophically oriented white people, savage and lustful people of color, and women of all races who are temptresses.

This idea can be seen alive and kicking in many schemas of developmental psychology and ethics, such as those of Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget. In my classes, students will fairly often make statements with profound racist implications about the ability of others to do philosophy, and justify them using Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs which they are learning about in their psychology classes. According to Maslow, people's needs exist in a hierarchy, starting at level one, with basic physiological needs, and ascending through a series of stages, to level five, the needs of self-actualization (which includes needs for "morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts") followed by level six- the need to know and understand and level seven- aesthetic needs. Only when we have satisfied our lower order survival needs are we able to move into a concern with higher needs, such as needs for self-development. Only those people who have satisfied their basic needs are able to engage in things like philosophical reflection and moral development.

This idea is often used by people sympathetic to the poor to claim that people's basic needs must be attended to. But along with that concern for the physical well-being of others goes an unstated paternalism: surely the poor aren't very good thinkers or artists. It would be too much to expect that of them: they are still taking care of their lower order needs.

Of course there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that people who are taking care of their survival needs do not engage in art, music, spiritual-

ity or philosophy. Indeed, much of the great art of the world (as long as we don't tautologically confine art to the classical forms created by the privileged) is done by people whose lives are very unstable (level two) and insecure economically (level one). Serious philosophy does take time, but there are many poor people in this world today who spend more time thinking about the nature of things than your average busy professor of philosophy. A person's class position does not correlate with how much time they have for serious reflection, nor with how important that reflection is to them, or how philosophically rich it is.

There are also some reasons to believe that the poor and those doing physical work have quite a bit to offer philosophically. People with more privilege may have their thinking distorted by desires to protect their privilege. They may be thinking about the kinds of things that are relevant to their own experience and not to the experiences of the poor. The poor are likely to be quite good at thinking about how to survive under harsh circumstances, how to make a meaningful and satisfying life under harsh circumstances, and about the nature of the social systems that cause them harm.

The idea that we can use the metric of non-emotionality of thought to judge its rationality is fraught with peril. A distinction between well-considered versus impulsively obtained conclusions is helpful in many contexts for distinguishing better from worse ways of deciding validity. But beyond that, thinking which is non-emotional is likely to be thinking which is devoid of ethical content, which is deaf to the contextual complexities of the situation in which it arises, and which is unable to resonate very deeply with those it addresses.

We should be very judicious in making claims for the superiority of a judgment based on its being non-emotional when we know the history of the ways that the thought processes of whole groups of people have been disparaged. If women's context sensitive forms of intuition have been rejected because a man who uses a more constrained thought process cannot understand her, whom should we take to be the better thinker? If a person of color, whose survival requires him to read body language and see what a person looks like when they are lying, decides someone is lying when he does not have the information to ground that judgment argumentatively, should we call his decision to treat something as a lie irrational? When an "uneducated" person refuses to change a belief in the face of a mountain of scholarly evidence, because it just doesn't feel right, can we be sure that the scholarly evidence is correct, and the judgment to not accept irrational?

People make many judgments on the basis of intelligent uses of emotion. Sorting out which are better and which are worse judgments is complex and requires forms of discourse analysis that are sensitive to the contexts and emotions present in a situation. The dogmatic rejection of emotion simplifies this process, but it is not "rational" and is unlikely to help us in making better judgments.

Plato had a deep passion for philosophy. That passion drove him on his spiritual quest for Truth. Philosophers are human beings full of emotions in everything we do. Philosophers of emotion have only begun to scratch the surface

of how to distinguish better from worse uses of emotion in philosophy.[18] Until we are more sophisticated in our ability to talk about the intelligent use of emotion, we would be well-advised to not reject thinking because we can see a trace of emotion in it.

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction helps us to understand how positively asserted terms, like reason, often rely for their creation on their opposition to a denigrated opposite term, like emotion. The form of rationality which is constructed through this opposition relies for its rhetorical force on unconsciously held beliefs about emotion, and much of the power behind the negation of emotion is grounded in negative views of those constituted as emotional: women, people of color, and the poor. The construction of philosophy on the basis of a form of reason which is buttressed by the negation of emotion is one of the key places where whiteness is woven deeply into the core of our practice.

Rationality as Habermas' Universal Reason

Jürgen Habermas has devoted quite a large body of work to pushing back against the relativism he believes is implied by postmodernism, and has given a very influential contemporary articulation of the defense of universalistic approaches to rationality. In the process of making that argument, Habermas relies on beliefs about Western superiority to ground his notion of the universality of reason.[19]

For Habermas, there is no a priori content to what views are to count as rational. Rather, for him, a rational viewpoint is one that was reached through a process of good argumentation. Thus, someone is said to be rational to the extent that they are willing to defend their views through arguments and respond to the force of the arguments of the partner in argumentation. From this it would follow that we could engage in arguments to settle disputes, and could use this method to undermine the abuses we have uncovered in current discourses of rationality, while still engaging in legitimizing practices.

In place of a correspondence theory of truth Habermas argues for a consensus theory of truth. Against the charge that what he is speaking about here is not truth, but a method for ascertaining truth, Habermas claims that the method for redeeming truth claims is not external to the meaning of truth. Following John Dewey, he defines truth as "warranted assertability." The truth of a statement lies in the warrantedness of what is asserted.[20]

Since the truth of a proposition is judged through the settlement of differences through argumentation, the best basis for saying that a certain proposition is true is that it was arrived at through good argumentation and that all those participating in the discussion agree to its truth.

Yet clearly, if consensus is to count as the mark of a true proposition, there must be some way to distinguish valid from invalid forms of consensus. If one participant in the discussion wields a sanction of death over other participants if

they disagree, it would be hard to imagine why we should accept the agreed upon proposition as true. A rationally motivated consensus (and therefore a consensus which yields truth- or "warranted assertability") is one in which what determines the outcome of the argument is nothing but the unforced force of the better argument (*der zwanglosen Zwang des besseren Arguments*). In order to be sure that this is the case, the participants must allow for a stepwise radicalization in which increasingly deep questions as to the context of the discussion can be raised.

There is a tendency in the literature to understand Habermas' argument to be that rationality is grounded in the concept of the force of the better argument, and yet a careful reading of the first section of the *Theory of Communicative Action* shows that Habermas is aware of the fundamental openness of what can be taken to be a satisfactory argument. Surely people can use open methods of argumentation to come to all sorts of conclusions. For this reason, the idea of an ideal speech situation is not enough to ground the claim that there is some sort of universality to reason. This is why Habermas develops another, more empirical side to his argument. And this is where we will see the implicit racism of his position.

Acknowledging that something more than the force of the better argument is needed to ground his theory of rationality, Habermas writes:

> Even when we are judging the rationality of individual persons, it is not sufficient to resort to this or that expression. The question is rather, whether A or B or a group of individuals behaves rationally *in general*; whether one may systematically expect that they have good reasons for their expressions . . . . When there appears a systematic effect in these respects, across various domains of interaction and over long periods (perhaps even over the space of a lifetime), we also speak of the rationality of a lifeworld shared not only by individuals but by collectives as well.[21]

Habermas then goes on to ask what lifeworld structures go into making rational action orientations of individuals possible. He pursues the answer to this question through an engagement with the various essays collected in the book *Rationality*.[22] These essays, written mainly by anthropologists and sociologists, deal with the question of whether or not it is possible to talk about rationality cross-culturally.

In this section, Habermas attempts to make clear what it is that distinguishes the modern from mythical worldviews. For him, mythical worldviews are characterized by their totalizing power. "The deeper one penetrates into the network of a mythical interpretation of the world, the more strongly the totalizing power of the savage mind stands out."[23] All information is processed through a single interpretive framework. One consequence of this is that people with mythical worldviews are not able to make the distinctions we moderns take to be fundamental. In particular, they do not permit a clear differentiation between nature and culture. "We can understand this phenomenon to begin with

as a mixing of two object domains, physical nature and sociocultural environment."[24]

One of the problems with a mythical worldview according to Habermas is that from within its parameters, judgments can only be dogmatically asserted. This he argues is because:

> mythical worldviews prevent us from categorically uncoupling nature and culture, not only through conceptually mixing the objective and social worlds but also through reifying the linguistic worldview. As a result the concept of the world is dogmatically invested with a specific content that is withdrawn from rational discussion and thus from criticism.[25]

What Habermas sees as a dogmatic conflation of the subjective and objective worlds prevents the raising of validity claims that require the ability to step back from the culture and view it externally. Thus, Habermas argues that what distinguishes mythical from modern worldviews is their differing degrees of openness. A closed worldview is characterized by an "insufficient differentiation among fundamental attitudes to the objective, social, and subjective worlds; and the lack of reflexivity in worldviews that cannot be identified as worldviews, as cultural traditions."[26]

At the end of this section, Habermas makes clear that with this distinction between closed and open worldviews he still has not grounded the rationality of open worldviews. "Of course this does not yet prove that the supposed rationality expressed in our understanding of the world is more than a reflection of the particular features of a culture stamped by science, that it may rightfully raise a claim to universality."[27] This necessitates the next step to the argument, an answer to the question as to why we should take the "openness" of a worldview as indication of its rationality.

Central for this part of Habermas' argument is his engagement with the work of Peter Winch who argues that there is no perspective from which we could ground the universality or superiority of our own worldview. Because each language has its own notions of reality and truth, there is no neutral perspective from which we could say that science registers them correctly.[28] Winch is critical of anthropological approaches that claim the peoples they study are irrational because of the logical contradictions that could be found in the statements they make. This claim is based on a category mistake, the beliefs of members of the studied culture are not scientific theories at all, and thus should not be seen as bad scientific theories. Where we might see logical contradictions, we may be missing something like shifts in level of meaning.

Habermas answers these objections he raises from Winch by using Robin Horton's idea that open worldviews promote learning and hence promote species development. According to Habermas and Horton, Winch may be right that we cannot judge the rationality of a worldview on the basis of its sharing with us views we take to be scientifically grounded, nor on the basis of our being able to find what look to us like logical contradictions in their utterances

about the world. But he believes that we can make that claim on the basis of a judgment about the openness of a worldview.

Habermas quotes from Horton's essay:

> In other words, absence of any awareness of alternatives makes for an absolute acceptance of the established theoretical tenets, and removes any possibility of questioning them. In these circumstances, the established tenets invest the believer with a compelling force.[29]

Habermas claims that the distinction "closed versus open" provides a context independent standard for judging the rationality of worldviews.[30]

Habermas raises the point that in a scientific culture there are many beliefs held as sacred, that is, as not open to criticism. He argues, however, that this means that our culture is not as completely open as it could be. One such position is our hypostatization of cognitive-instrumental rationality as the only legitimate form of rationality. Here, Habermas attempts to slip his own conclusions into the discussion without support. Why this does not count as an example of the closedness of our worldview rather that the claim that there is such a thing as a universal rationality, or that the West is more progressive than the rest of the world, for example, is never explained.

The problem with Habermas' view here is that the elements of the Western world view which we must hold as sacred are precisely those required for Habermas' own conclusions. An open worldview *must* distinguish between nature and culture because otherwise how could we ground our theory of communicative action? And we need some way to ground the rationality of at least some aspects of our modern worldview because without this we fall into relativism, which cannot account for the progress he claims we know to be exhibited by modern Western culture.

Habermas fails in his attempt to ground reason as a universal measure for the validity of statements. His attempt to provide a grounding more firm than that provided by an open notion of the value of argumentation gets braided together with assumptions of the cultural superiority of the West. Habermas seems to hope that his readers will share some of his cultural prejudices, and that those holding those common assumptions will together feel satisfied that their views are grounded. For those not sharing those values, Habermas' argument ends up reading like a shaggy dog story that trails off into an infinite void.

What Habermas is doing here is the cultural work of creating hegemony. His complex craftsmanship helps to create a view of the world that simultaneously puts forward the superiority of Western ways, while claiming its universality. This leads to the belief that in the West we somehow found the truth and a more rational way of being in the world. Of course we will be generous enough to share these discoveries with others, but in the process, they will be articulated into a particular cultural practice and the traces of that parochialism will be buried.

Conclusion

The Hegelian notion of the false universal is helpful for understanding what's going on with these three examples of reason and whiteness. For Hegel, concepts which arise in a particular situation or context, and which can help us understand a part of reality, under some circumstances, can sometimes come to be understood as having universal validity and applicability and the traces of their historical and parochial lineage come to be obscured.

In all three of the cases explored above, a cultural particular is presented through academic philosophy as a universal. Logic is understood to be a universal measure, and it is used to measure statements that are based on other language games. Non-emotionality is taken to be a standard for judging the validity of statements, and whole populations are rejected as being too emotional in their thought processes. Western ways of understanding the world are taken in a circular fashion to ground the superiority of judgments typical of Western thinkers.

By presenting a cultural particular as a universal, philosophy itself as an academic practice helps to buttress culturally white ways of understanding the world and colludes in making whiteness invisible but socially potent. White forms of reason become like magnetic fields, invisibly drawing and holding together forms of meaning while remaining largely unnoticed. As long as philosophers continue to produce and enable these equivocations, philosophy will be a site for the reproduction of racist social outcomes.

One of the most pernicious uses of the forms of equivocation and fantasy explored in this chapter is that the whole history of colonialism and slavery ends up being submerged. It is replaced with a story of European influence over the world because of superior thought processes. This belief is widely held and is used all over the world to explain and justify the spread of Western political, economic, and cultural forms.

It is crucial as we enter into the next period in world history, where capitalist forms of development are leading to global warming, where over a billion people in the world regularly do not have enough to eat and where languages and cultures are going extinct at an alarming rate, that we have a realistic view of the nature of the history of the West.

Philosophy has so far played an ignominious role in helping to create an image of a West that has come to prominence as a result of its "superior philosophy." As long as philosophers remain silent about the ways that Eurocentrism is wrapped into some of philosophy's most prized conceptualizations of the world, they will be complicit in upholding ways of understanding the world that lead to devastating outcomes.

They will also be doing bad philosophy. So long as we are reactive when we get questioned about the non-Western history of Western philosophy, when we bristle at the idea that there may be "rational" ways of understanding the world that don't rely on the law of non-contradiction, when we repeat distorted versions of our history which leave out the contributions of people from outside

of Europe, when we hold on to the idea that there is something superior about Western thinking that is the cause of Western economic domination, we will be playing into racism, whether we know it or not.

Reason and rationality are enabled in playing the destructive roles outlined in this chapter in part by the tenacity with which many thinkers, who are not necessarily motivated by Eurocentrism, hold onto something that will give them security in their ability to make good judgments. Surely we want to be able to make judgments, and it has seemed to many that universal forms of rationality are indispensable for doing so.

And yet many philosophers, pragmatists, and postmodernists among them, have done important work, articulating the vast epistemological world that exists between a relativism that permits anything and a universalism that operates as an iron law found in the universe.

Postmodern philosopher Jane Flax argues that our moral judgments are likely to be more well-considered when we take responsibility for them and see them as judgments we are making from our own situated positions, rather than as truths that justify themselves:

> To take responsibility is to firmly situate ourselves within contingent and imperfect context, to acknowledge differential privileges of race, gender, geographic location, and sexual identities, and to resist the delusory and dangerous hope of redemption to a world not of our own making. We need to learn to make claims on our own and others' behalf and to listen to those which differ from ours, knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person's own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed, embedded, and legitimated.[31]

Developing sophistication around those discursive practices is an important place philosophy can be useful. Flax argues for a philosophy which is modest in its claims and open to a multiplicity of perspectives, and which lives with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Following Dewey, I believe that it is helpful to see philosophy as a practice that living human beings engage in to help us to figure out ways of living well together and ways of engaging with the world.[32] Since there is no universal language-game-transcending human culture and ready to authorize our statements, we must do our best to get along in the world with the faculties that we have: the ability think, to engage in dialogue, to question, to wonder, and to disagree. We develop argumentative tools and discursive strategies, and we use them because they work. When others question how well they work or what blind spots they may carry, we reflect on their nature and remain open to revising them. Philosophers are well-trained at using these tools of analysis and reflection. Philosophy trains us in intellectual flexibility, in the arts of ascending ladders of inquiry and analysis. It trains us to wonder, to question received truths, to revise our most basic conceptual schemas.

Like so much racism in the contemporary West, the forms of racism that philosophy helps to reinforce are largely perpetuated by well-meaning people who do not intend to be racist. The kinds of racism that persist today are much more insidious and more subtle than older forms, and for this reason, professional philosophers have an important role to play in rooting them out with our well-honed skills at analyzing cultural logics.

When we look at what is left of philosophy when we get rid of the notion that it is a universal method for getting to the truth that has led the West to achieve "greatness," we still have quite a bit left. We have a marvelous process, deeply reflective, open in its methods and available to people from all cultures, of all genders, and at all class levels in any society to practice: sustained and careful reflection, wonder and inquiry. We have philosophy as love of wisdom.

Notes

1. Thanks to my colleague Tram Nguyen for this insight.

2. In addition to referring to a particular approach to knowing the world, the term "philosophy" also refers to a particular historical tradition or lineage. The boundaries of that lineage are obsessively policed, in ways that assure that philosophy remains constituted as a white=European tradition. The ancient Greeks were not engaged in a white practice when they did philosophy. They were neither white nor European. At that time, "race" didn't exist and neither did "Europe" as a unifying concept. According to Herodotus, the Greeks saw themselves as members of a relatively insignificant society living in the shadows of intellectual giants such as the Egyptians. See Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

Plato's argumentative methodology is probably Greek in origins, being rooted in the rhetorical strategies of the sophists. But it seems likely that his basic belief that there is a unitary truth that transcends the shifting vagaries of experience, that is to be pursued for it's own sake, was deeply influenced by Egyptian metaphysics. So the rationalism that is so central to philosophy's self-conception may not have been white in its origins. If a color can be posthumously attributed to rationalism, that color is probably somewhere between black and brown. In standard histories, Plato is seen as originating rationalism and he is usually understood to have been white.

There are a few other central nodes where the Western tradition is constructed as white. Rather than acknowledge the centrality of Muslim North African Philosophers in carrying the lineage forward in the middle ages, the tradition is taught as if a light went out somewhere around 400 C.E. only to be magically flipped on again in the Renaissance. (See María Rosa Menoçal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* [Boston: Little Brown, 2002].) Core ideas to Western philosophy, such as democracy, which have important sources of origin in the Americas are truncated, and their histories mangled to fit the story of the Western origin of everything good.

While there was a flurry of interest in these issues of non-Western roots of Western philosophy in the 1990s, discussion of them has largely gone dormant. My reading of that literature led me to believe that the multi-culturalists won the rational argument, but lost the battle for hegemony. Those who have attempted to trace Western philosophy's lineage beyond the mythical origin of the Greeks have been shunned, ostracized, and mostly ignored, but many of their core claims stand.

Those issues are complex and contentious and will hopefully receive the attention they deserve in a new generation of scholarship.

3. Bernal, *Black Athena*.

4. Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice, *Distinction: A Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

5. This expression comes from Luce Irigaray. See *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74.

6. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Bk. 4 Ch. 3 1006a, 2–9, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York; Random House, 1941), 737. For an excellent discussion of the status of the law of non-contradiction see the entry Dialethism (2004) Graham Priest. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/ search/searcher. py?query=Dialethism (accessed July 1, 2009).

7. It should also be noted that the role of logic in science has often overstated: while logi-

cal thinking helps to clarify thought, scientists use many other techniques: such as careful observation, the creation of compelling narratives, studying the work of others, and intuition, in the development of and deliberation over scientific discoveries. Logic is one tool among many.

8. Paul Edwards, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1972/1967), vol. 4, 512.

9. Jay L. Garfield and Graham Priest, "Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought," in *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, ed. Graham Priest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Found at: www.metareligion.com/Philosophy/Articles/Epistemology (accessed July 1, 2009).

10. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Charles Muller (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005).

11. For an excellent discussion of how contemporary White American and Chinese thinkers vary in their use of principles of reasoning in their everyday judgments see: Richard E. Nisbett, Kaiping Peng, Incheol Choi, and Ara Norenzayan, "Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic Versus Analytic Cognition," *Psychological Review*, 108 no. 2, (Apr 2001): 291–310.

12. Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

13. Plato, *Republic*. Trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138. Section 431 c.

14. Plato, *Republic,* 150–1. Sections 439–441.

15. Nancy Tuana, *Women and the History of Philosophy* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1992).

16. See David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

17. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

18. See David Haekwon Kim, ed., *Passions of the Color Line: Emotion and Power in Racial Construction* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

19. This is a compressed version of my paper: "The Unforced Force of the More Familiar Argument: A Critique of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Rationality," *Philosophy Today* 43, no. 4 (1999): 348–60.

20. For an interesting criticism of this view as confusing the meaning of "truth" with a criterion for truth see: Alessandro Ferrara, "A critique of Habermas' Consensus Theory of Truth," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 13, no. 1 (1987): 39–68 and "Critical Theory and its Discontents: On Wellmer's Critique of Habermas," in *Praxis International* 8, no. 3 (Oct. 1989): 305–20.

21. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1.* Trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 43.

22. Bryan R. Wilson, ed., *Rationality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970).

23. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 45. It is interesting to note that translator Thomas McCarthy adds scare quotes around savage mind that are not in the original [wilden denkens].

24. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 48.

25. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 51.

26. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 52.

27. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 53.

28. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 57.

29. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 61.

30. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 62.

31. Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence," in *Feminists Theorize the Political,* ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 461.

32. John Dewey, *The Quest For Certainty* (New York: Putnam Group, 1960).