

Philosophy of Race

PHIL 327

Tues and Thus. 8:35-9:55am

Macdonald Engineering, 280

Prof. Eric Lewis, Leacock, 908

“I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” John Mbiti

“We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society.” Angela Davis

“Reality is racialized.” Lewis Gordon

If philosophy can be viewed as directed at the liberation of minds, it can equally be charged with failing to engage in this liberatory act fairly and equally. The philosophy of race is in many ways an enquiry into what the liberation of minds looks like against a backdrop of racist oppression, where liberation takes on assorted valences and is distributed unfairly. It is an enquiry into what forms of liberation white supremacy endorses, and what liberation from white supremacy might look like, and how to achieve it.

Philosophy of race, unlike certain other philosophical projects which are primarily descriptive, is essentially transformative. It does not seek to just describe “the given” but to radically transform conceptions of personhood, ethics, politics and not just theories, but the application, of social justice. It does not operate from a “view from nowhere” perspective, but denies the value, or even the possibility, of such a perspective, critiquing such attempts as really the view from a “white everywhere”.

If, as Charles Mills argues, the central problems, solutions, methods and theories of philosophy take as a given white personhood, and so are already exclusionary for blacks and others deemed to be racialized, how can a philosophy of race--a given theory or course for that matter--not simply fall prey to this same problem; is there, per force, white philosophy of race and black, brown and other racialized philosophies of race? Recognition of the different starting points of philosophical enquiry which white supremacy endorses, as opposed to those developed by blacks and other systematically oppressed people (often in direct dialogue and opposition to white starting points) is to recognize that whiteness must be discussed. It also puts a premium on studying texts by BIPOC folks on race and racism.

And while the following claim is disputed (and will be addressed in the class), a study of the philosophy of race is really a study of the philosophy, history and mechanics of racism. For the concept of race was developed, and continues to be employed, in the service of racism (It also continues to be employed by racialized people in positive and empowering ways, but always against a historicised backdrop of its pernicious use). This topic will also come up in our investigation into post-racialism, seen by some as a desirable stage in the evolution of societies

away from racism, and by others as an attempt to erase history and forestall continued analysis of white supremacy.

This course, while focusing on a number of key philosophical texts in the philosophy of race, is also intended as an example in critical pedagogy closely indexed to its subject matter. We shall strive, as best as we can, to abide by the following dictum of bell hooks:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

And so, I hope we can together engage in “the production of theory as a social practice that can be liberatory,” as bell hooks so eloquently puts it.

Readings:

A proper study of the philosophy of race requires knowledge of a range of issues surrounding race, including history, sociology, and anthropology. Anti-racist actions and theories have also been advanced in media other than the written word (such as song, dance, craft and organizational structures), while texts important to the study of race and responses to racism are often “fixed” in forms other than the traditional essay or book—broadside, pamphlet, transcriptions, newsletters and the like. Additional suggested readings will be distributed.

There are four required books (one you need to purchase):

The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois (eBook available library)

Race: A Philosophical Introduction third edition, Paul C. Taylor (must purchase, available at Paragraphe)

Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race, Charles Mills (eBook available library)

Look a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness, George Yancy (eBook available library)

Additional Readings will be made available via MyCourses, including works by bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Frantz Fanon, Kathryn Gines and Alia Al-Saji.

Readings may be modified in the light of class interest.

Assessment

Your grade will be based on the following:

4 in class quizzes (one on each of the primary readings) each worth 10%

Additional readings research assignment: 20%

Final paper: 40%

The class will have a TA, and so will be divided into sections of approximately 20 students each. These sections will not meet weekly, but a number of times throughout the term. We will also have guest lectures attend the class, either in person or via zoom.

McGill is located on un-ceded land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We are presently meeting, here on the downtown McGill University campus, on territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation. We should all recognize this fact and think about the history of genocide and racism which these and other Indigenous peoples have suffered, and what we can do to combat its continuation.

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.”

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures”
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