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Racism as a Form of Bad Faith

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If a philosophical problem is defined as a problem for which a final answer appears unlikely, then the problem of formulating a definitive theory of the concept of *racism is* surely a philosophical one. The theory I propose here stands as an interpretation among the many other interpretations offered throughout the turbulent history of the subject. Its strength rests primarily on its ability to challenge other theories of racism and bring out some of their strengths. Racism as a form of bad faith offers such possibilities.1

Bad faith, in existential-phenomenological language, is a flight from freedom. It is an effort to hide from responsibility. From the existential-phenomenological standpoint, freedom and humanity are regarded as one. Since freedom and human being are regarded as one, we can translate bad faith into more prosaic language as the effort to hide from human beings. The effort to hide from human beings takes at least two forms: rejection of the humanity in others and rejection of the humanity in oneself.

The first is a flight from human being in the flesh. This form of flight involves the elevation of abstract humanity over real-live, flesh-and-blood people. A person who adopts this attitude toward humanity has no problem harming actual human beings in the name of humanity. Such a figure is the paradigm insult to humanism, and he rightfully serves as the butt of most attacks on self-righteous appeals to humanity. This figure lives for principles *over* people and will do almost anything so long as it is in the name of something. We may add that the ultimate desire of such a figure is disembodiment. Such a figure may bark at all forms of "objectifications." His ideal world is a world in which he is ultimately protected from being seen.

The second form is a flight to a reduction of human flesh to "mere flesh." This flight is an effort to

place humanity on no higher level than any other substance in the world. In the technical jargon, this form of bad faith is a flight to facticity. This form of bad faith involves a desire not only to be seen, but to be seen forever. It is an effort to make the transition from contingency to necessity or forms of determinism. It is an effort to place values from the realm of "ought," to the realm of "is." This effort is sometimes referred to as *the spirit of seriousness,* where values are wrenched from the "absent" realm of *ought* into the "present" realm of *is* by way of being regarded as material features of the world. Thus some people "are" good and other people "are" bad. The serious person consequently attempts to avoid responsibility. If he is either good or bad *before* making decisions, then his virtue or vice are simply functions of the type of being he is. In racial contexts, these functions are extended to collectivities. There are obvious fallacies in such extensions, for couldn't the class of good people and the class of bad people cross racial lines?

Both forms of bad faith are lived realities. They are lived as certain attitudes toward evidence. For in bad faith, one chooses the false as the true while being aware of its falsity. One deceives oneself. For example, one may take certain attitudes toward evidence in general in order to believe or reject particular advancements of evidence. It is the nature of bad faith attitudes to play the game of double standards. A man in bad faith may claim that women are bad drivers. When statistics are offered that contradict his claim, he may claim that statistical evidence doesn't capture the nuances of driving. (Although if the statistics worked in his favor, he may have asserted them as *proof.)* Eventually, if pressed, he may even go so far as to retreat to the view that there is something "masculine" about driving. What he seeks, we would determine, is an appeal so linked with gender identity that no woman could meet its demand.

A racist is someone who adopts the attitude that his race is superior to other races. Other races are not only regarded as inferior, but they are also *blamed* for their supposed inferiority. To be a member of the racist's group involves denying that race "really" matters, whereas to be a member of the group who is the object of racism is to realize every day how much race matters. For the racist's attitude to be what William James once called a "live option," there needs also to be an ongoing support system of power, an ideology. This situation of power is *racism.* A racist usually has "confirmation" of his superiority in virtue of his access to a wider framework of possibilities that fortify his denial of its contradiction. The racist fails to see that it is a mark of power to have real options, just as the bourgeois fails to see that a worker may not have at his finger tips the live option of becoming rich. I won't go into the racist's psychoanalytical motivations toward racism here, and I leave aside here my stand on the political economy of racism. But let us consider this. There are certain themes implicit in a racist attitude.

First, the racist confronts another human being in the flesh and asks him to justify his humanity. When he does so, the racist demands the Other to justify his right to exist. But no human being can do so without the presentation of himself as a given existent. The racist, then, in making the

demand, positions himself as self-justified while asking another human being to justify his right to exist. Symmetry is already broken down in a situation that demands symmetry. The racist thus elevates himself—or at least humanity—above the human to the level of God and the Other below humanity. In effect, he says to the Other, "The problem with you is that you are not *I*. Show me that you have a quality that has an equivalence relation with me."2

The irony of such a formulation, however, is that it imposes an abstraction on both the racist and the "object" of racism. That abstraction is the abstraction of "substance." For at issue is the question of *kinds* of substantiality, much like the Cartesian problem of Ego-substance versus extended-substance. Are these two different kinds one?

The symbols of racism usually rest on reducing groups of human beings to either pole of the bad faith dichotomy. Some people are regarded as pure human substance in the world. Others are regarded as human absence in the world. Responsibility is situated in relations with the former, but not with the latter. Since human beings embody both the possibility of being seen and the possibility to transform the context of being seen, the polarization of groups of human beings into both aspects of their existence is a form of self-deception. For whatever human beings are presented as, they are simultaneously aware of not being identical with their presentations. Moreover, that they are not identical with their presentations does not free them from the fact of their being presented as their presentations. A black person is thus not only a black person. Yet, such a person "is," in a very significant sense, a black person. All black persons, like all human beings, are *transphenomenal* and *metastable*: They exceed their presentations and they don't existentially stand still.

A racist hides from himself because he has taken an attitude that requires the denial of his own transphenomenality and metastability. If he tries to maintain both the factical and transcendent features of his existence but deny the Other's, he faces the problem of formulating himself as God to the Other. But "being" God is a paradigm example of bad faith. It is to be the contradictory free substance, awkwardly formulated by Hegel and Sartre as the in-itself-for-itself. It is to say, in effect, "What I am and what I will be are what I am already presented as being." But to "be" wholly such a presentation requires the ongoing choice to confirm it. The racist chooses to interpret himself as a materially superior being, as a being who ultimately stands in relation to his "natural" inferiors as a god. In Hegelian language he desires Mastery. In Sartrean language, he desires to be God.

The significance of the racist's interpretation of himself as a superior being is theodicean and ethical. Let us consider the theodicean significance in terms of antiblack racism and an antiblack world. In an antiblack world, whiteness is presented as the fulfillment of desire. In such a world, every white person faces the irony of being God while being aware, in virtue of being human beings, of not being God. If white people are God, then they have achieved the object of their desire.

It is a mark, then, of an antiblack world that humanity has, at least symbolically, died, and in fact it is a mark of most critiques of racism that in a racist world, humanity has been stifled. I call this phenomenon the *misanthropic consciousness* since its aim is an elimination of humanity in two directions; the powerful are raised above the level of the human, and the powerless are situated below it.

The theodicean problem raised by antiblack racism leads to a rather interesting conclusion on approaches to studying ethics. Some years ago, a text appeared with a provocative question, *Is God a White Racist?3* Suppose we suspend the question of whether God is a white racist or not and ask what is the significance of the religious rituals of those who may believe in the irremediable fact of metaphysical antiblackness and, for that matter, misogyny. Black women's worship is such an example. Such women show that one can love an Other with whom there is absolutely no hope of achieving an identity relation. This possibility challenges conventional wisdom that ethical life begins with reaching out to the similarity of the Other, it also suggests that human beings are able to reach and love an Other with whom there is absolutely no chance of similarity or fulfillment of desire.4 It is a fact that there are women who worship the symbol of a man and that there are black women who worship a white one. On this matter, we need not here deal with the question of whether such women are misguided or not. More interesting is the challenge posed for a white to reach out to a black without the need to mediate similarity or assimilation. The conclusion is that difference doesn't eliminate responsibility.

The ethical significance of the racist's choosing himself as a racist is that all racists are ultimately responsible for their racism. The appeal to innocence becomes problematic. No doubt there would be objections in the form of *kinds* of racism. There are people who may have racist beliefs that they abandon upon receiving sound information. Then there are those who may stubbornly cling to their position. But how different is this from saying that the former may have had an attitude toward *information* about other races instead of an attitude against those races, whereas the latter had already rejected evidence in support of the equality of other races and is therefore against those *races* themselves? Are people who remain ignorant to the plight of others responsible for their attitudes toward other races?

An important aspect of a person in bad faith is his uncritical attitude toward evidence he favors and his critical attitude toward evidence that displeases him. For people who appeal to ignorance to claim innocence, they have to show that they were not pleased by the initial bad evidence available to them. To hear that blacks and Indians are savages is one thing; to accept that as a given truth is another. To continue accepting that they are supposed to be incapable of achieving feats that one regards as high human achievements in light of the countless alternative interpretations available —whether as auto workers or local mayors or astronauts in space or philosophers—makes the acceptance a downright form of denial.

In conclusion, as space permitted in a newsletter is rather limited, the concept of bad faith can serve

as a useful point of departure into the next phase of analysis of racism—whether they be critical exposure, Marxist demystification, psychoanalytic revelation, deconstruction of centrism, or pragmatic demonstration of meaningful action. By exploring the possibility of people's choice of racism, we should be able to reintroduce accountability, an aspect of human reality, of situations, that serve also as foci of praxis toward change. A cry against most progressive efforts toward social change is defense of the (usually abstract) innocent. I consider I warning to be the call for post-revolutionary behavior in I revolutionary or revolutionary times. An appeal to concept of bad faith is the reminder that there is a point beyond which innocence can no longer be a serious appeal.

Notes

1. Discussion of this view of racism is available in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew,* trans. George Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1948); *Notebooks for an Ethics,* trans. David PeUauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); sections *of Being and Not*: *A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology,* trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), and some of his essays on the U.S.A. and various nations of Africa. Frantz Fanon provides some discussion of the subject in "West Indians and Africans" and "Racism and Culture," in his *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays,* trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), and it is arguably the underlying theme in his *Black Skit; White Masks,* trans. Charles Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Commentaries on Sartre's discussions are available in Stuart Charme's *Vulgarity and Authenticity* and Joseph Catalano's *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason," Volume I, "Theory of Practical Ensembles"* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). I have also written a systematic discussion of this relationship in my dissertation, "Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism: A Study in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre" (New Haven: Yale University, 1993).

2. There is another dimension to the problem of justifying one's *existence.* If Kant is correct that existence isn't a predicate, and if justification or proof demands predication, then the racist demands members of other races to offer justification or proof without the means of doing so.

3. William Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973).

4. A rather poignant discussion of this aspect of human beings can be found in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

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