



# 4

## Ideas of Race in Twentieth Century American and Continental Philosophy

American or pragmatist philosophy and continental philosophy begin and end with human life and subjectivity in society. In both philosophical traditions, the starting point is not the physical sciences, because both American and continental philosophy use methods of describing and analyzing actual human experience. Scholars of race in each of these philosophical traditions have the goal of understanding practical, political, social, emotional, and moral aspects of racial experience, rather than the intellectual and empirical justification for ideas about race, taken cognitively, or as strains of abstract thought or objective knowledge. Such thinkers have emphasized the importance of the human subject, as prior to the practice of science. The underlying insight is that human beings invent science, shape it, practice it, and change it.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) provided clear examples of the subject matter and methods of American philosophy in terms of race and Edmond Husserl (1859–1938), developed a strain of phenomenology in continental philosophy that has proved relevant to race. We will begin with them and then, with their primary methodological insights in mind, consider subsequent American and continental philosophers who provide perspectives different from both the canonical thought of Chapter 1 and the scientific aspects of race of Chapter 3. In many senses American and continental philosophers have furthered the progressive and inspirational thought and action discussed in Chapter 2.

## W.E.B. Du Bois and Edmond Husserl

In his 1923 essay, “The Superior Race,” Du Bois relates his conversation with a white supremacist. After discussing difficulties of identifying the black group, Du Bois is asked, “But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it ‘black’ when you admit that it is not black?” Du Bois answers, “I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride Jim Crow in Georgia” (Du Bois 1923, p. 60). Du Bois’s trenchant response serves to define blackness in terms of the social status and circumstances of members of a group of people in late nineteenth-century America. This is an historically contextualized definition of blackness, based on the experience of black people. Du Bois here presents experience as a reality more compelling than abstract criteria for being black or whether the black race could be independently identified in science as a group with inherited physical and/or cultural traits. In defining race this way, Du Bois was practicing philosophical **pragmatism**. Pragmatism is a tradition in American philosophy that turns toward the real-life consequences of ideas, principles, and hypotheses in order to understand and analyze them.

We can also see that Du Bois practiced sociology as a pragmatist, in his first research project. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, first published in 1899, Du Bois designed and carried out an empirical study of the circumstances of African Americans in Philadelphia. Aldon Morris explains how the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century practice of professional sociology that Du Bois first encountered, was not an empirical science, testable by data, with documented sources. Rather, sociology at that time was a form of speculative theory that Du Bois called “car-window sociology,” as in musings from a Pullman car while traveling through the South on holiday (Du Bois 1967, p. 51). Soon after the publication of *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois wrote in *Souls of Black Folk*:

To the car-window sociologist, to the man who seeks to understand and know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries,—to such men very often the whole trouble with the black field-hand may be summed up by Aunt Ophelia’s word, “Shiftless!” They have noted repeatedly scenes like one I saw last summer. We were riding along the highroad to town at the close of a long hot day. A couple of young black fellows passed us in a mule team, with several bushels of loose corn in the ear. One was driving, listlessly bent forward, his elbows on his knees,—a happy-go-lucky, careless picture of irresponsibility. The other was fast asleep in the bottom of the wagon. As we passed we noticed an ear of corn fall from the wagon. They never saw it,—not they. A rod farther on we noted another ear on

the ground; and between that creeping mule and town we counted twenty-six ears of corn. Shiftless? Yes, the personification of shiftlessness. And yet follow those boys: they are not lazy; to-morrow morning they'll be up with the sun; they work hard when they do work, and they work willingly. They have no sordid, selfish, money-getting ways, but rather a fine disdain for mere cash. They'll loaf before your face and work behind your back with good-natured honesty. They'll steal a watermelon, and hand you back your lost purse intact. Their great defect as laborers lies in their lack of incentive beyond the mere pleasure of physical exertion. They are careless because they have not found that it pays to be careful; they are improvident because the improvident ones of their acquaintance get on about as well as the provident. (Du Bois 1904, p. 154)

The early sociology that Du Bois sought to revise was steeped with racist normative assumptions, in keeping with Jim Crow white supremacy, speculative and biased biological science, and racist political ideology. Unlike Du Bois's approach, such sociologists did not take up the perspectives of their human subjects.

The intellectual inferiority of Negroes was a basic assumption throughout science and society. But Du Bois was confident about his own intellectual abilities and he rejected doctrines of general Negro inferiority. From a Howard BA, he earned a Harvard MA and PhD and would have been granted a PhD at the University of Berlin, but for lack of a one-term residency requirement. He knew that the unchallenged racist sociology of his day lacked empirical foundations. And he aimed to make sociology a real science through study of African Americans and thereby also demonstrate that racial inequality was the result of racism and not inherited inferiority. Through interviews, statistical research, and analyses, all informed by history, Du Bois developed social science methodology, assisted by student and community researchers and informants. Among other findings, Du Bois showed how the following worked in black communities: the relation of crime to unemployment; class divisions among African Americans; American black agency through community organization, primarily the black church; activism as a way to correct injustice (Morris 2015).

Du Bois's methodology reflected nascent grass roots work in his time. In Edward Baltzell's 1967 introduction to Du Bois's *Philadelphia Negro*, he notes that when this book, which was to fall out of print for almost 50 years, was published in 1899, the leaders of the Settlement House movement had already begun to call for fact-based studies of contemporary society. Beatrice Webb (Potter) and Charles Booth in Great Britain and Jane Addams in the United States abandoned a priori theorizing to study social facts, living and working among the very groups who were their subjects (Du Bois 1967, xvi–xii).

Du Bois influenced subsequent social scientists and his work may also have coincided with or anticipated Arthur Bentley's thought. Bentley, in *The Process of Government* (discussed in Chapter 2), called for attention to political activities and interests as a way to understand how what he called "government" and we would today call "political power" operates in society. Bentley's contribution, like Du Bois's, was neglected. Bentley was a white outsider to mainstream academia, a journalist and an independent scholar and Du Bois was a scholar who was excluded because of his race. Bentley's book was published in 1908, without any mention of Du Bois, although they shared the same rejection of car window or arm chair theorizing. But, Du Bois knew the leading pragmatists of his day and Bentley was in touch with John Dewey, so they may have interacted indirectly. The grounds on which they both rejected speculative arm-chair theory are very comparable. In *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940, Du Bois contrasted his method with Herbert Spencer in providing his own intellectual history for *The Philadelphia Negro*:

Herbert Spencer finished his ten volumes of Synthetic Philosophy in 1896. The biological analogy, the vast generalizations, were striking, but actual scientific accomplishment lagged. For me an opportunity seemed to present itself ... I determined to put science into sociology through a study of the condition and problems of my own group. I was going to study the facts, any and all facts, concerning the American Negro and his plight, and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalization which I could. (Du Bois 1967, p. 51, cited by Digby in Du Bois 1967, p. xviii)

And in his *Process of Government*, Bentley suggested how his call for empiricism might be applied to racial difference within society:

I am not denying that there may be actual differences in nervous complexity (and so capacity) between physical races of men just as there may be between individuals. I am not denying the significance of the skulls of Pithecanthropus and of the Neanderthal man. The whole point concerns the interpretation of social activity and organization in terms of such differences. Against the exaggerated emphasis that is placed on slight shadings of capacity stated in anatomical or physiological terms, I am appealing to a whole world of social facts, and asking their analysis on their own merits. (Bentley, p. 249)

But there is a difference in how Bentley and Du Bois analyzed race. Bentley's attack on racialist analyses of group differences within society was not motivated by progressive ideals, that is, his attack was not normative, but

purely methodological. By contrast, Du Bois attack on the same sources was motivated by his desire to show how racism was unjust.

Du Bois also knew Franz Boas quite well and approved of his work in distinguishing between biological race and culture (as discussed in Chapter 3) (Shenk 2015). However, Du Bois's definition of "the black man" as "a person who must ride Jim Crow in Georgia" is something different from an empirical sociological or anthropological analysis, or even a psychological one and it goes beyond pragmatic description. Du Bois's definition differs from criteria for membership in a racial group or distinctions between heredity and environment, or the social causes of disadvantaged racial traits. It signals a concern with the experience of individuals, as definitive of race. And in that vein, Du Bois was not focused on oppression only, because he had his eye on what could be possible in the future—he was interested in the aspirations of American black people. He called what he presented as a primary aspiration, **destiny**. In his 1897 address to the American Negro Academy, he said:

But while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences. ...Manifestly some of the great races of today—particularly the Negro race—have not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving. For the development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit, only Negroes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness that great message we have for humanity. Negroes are ... a nation stored with wonderful possibilities of culture, their destiny is not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals. (Du Bois 1897)

This kind of faith in the future of a race as a striving and deserving cultural group is a moral prediction, not a scientific one. It is a vision of something better to come, which should come. In that sense, Du Bois's proclamation of that faith in a shared, glorious Negro racial destiny was clearly intended to inspire others to share his faith. This practice of **rhetoric**, or as we shall see later with Cornel West, **prophecy**, has become an integral part of American Philosophy of Race, specifically African American philosophy.

The criticism of science in continental philosophy has been even more forceful than in American philosophy, because the question has not been how to improve science by making it more realistically informed, but how to relate science to human subjectivity and values. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) first raised this foundational question in terms of the assumption that

objective knowledge is possible in the natural sciences, including geometry. Husserl argued that perception and observation, the factual foundation for objectivity, occurs on an individual level, to individual consciousness. But subjective experience does not have a vocabulary in the natural sciences and instead, perception and observation are translated into objective language that does not refer to anything which has been experienced by individual consciousness. The result is that, rather than being based on fact, so-called objective science is based on fiction, on experiences that are only imagined. Another way of describing this problem is that we describe our observations with terms that refer to universal abstract qualities that we never directly experience. We then assume that we are thereby describing a shared world but others who “share” that world are in the same position as we are. They, like us, have to proceed from their own unique conscious experience, to an imagined experience described in language that may not exactly refer to what they have experienced. Husserl described the result of this disconnection as a crisis, because human beings have become alienated from knowledge that is presented as an ultimate value, although it fails to describe or address their spiritual needs.

Husserl’s solution to fictional ideas of objectivity in science was that the individual knower engage in an *epoché* or bracketing of the existence or objective property of any object of consciousness and then proceed with description of the object, as an object of consciousness. He proposed that this would lead to knowledge about the structures of consciousness and ultimately a philosophical system of genuine knowledge, which could be a foundation for the natural sciences. That process and its resulting general principles are modern **phenomenology**, of which Husserl is considered the founder (Husserl 1970, pp. 3–18).

Husserl’s criticism of the natural sciences would apply to the social sciences insofar as they have developed by accepting the methods and factual knowledge of the natural sciences as their own model and ideal. However, there are difficulties in building a theory of social science knowledge based on phenomenological *epoché*, because social experience varies more than physical perception (Gorman 1975, pp. 396–403). And there is further variation, based on racial difference. Such racial experience of the social world can and has been phenomenologically described by continental philosophers. Continental philosophy has been more existential than abstractly phenomenological, concerning race, yielding **existentialist** phenomenology, a departure from Husserlian phenomenology that is nonetheless deeply indebted to it.

## American Philosophy and Race

American philosophy is the work of philosophers in the United States who also tend to be pragmatists. Classic Pragmatism consists of the philosophical work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), Josiah Royce (1855–1916), John Dewey (1859–1952), and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Pragmatism declined after Dewey but in the 1970s, it began a renaissance and revision through the work of Richard Rorty (1931–2007), Hilary Putnam (1926–2016), and Robert Brandom (1950–). At different stages of pragmatism’s heyday, decline, and revival, the work of African American pragmatist philosophers have engaged the classical and renascent sources, as well as Du Bois’s foundational contributions to American Philosophy of Race. Alain LeRoy Locke (1885–1954), James Baldwin (1924–1987), and Cornel West (1953) are major figures in both the American and pragmatist traditions and they in turn engage the work of other African American writers and activists. The secondary literature about Locke, Baldwin, and West also contains reclaimed and new contributions. African American philosophers have also worked directly in the pragmatist tradition as it was first developed by white pragmatist philosophers. For instance, William T. Fontaine (1909–1968), who was the first African American employed in the ivy league, at the University of Pennsylvania, developed ideas in social philosophy influenced by the work of Mead (Fontaine 1942). More recent philosophers of race, such as V. Denise James, have taken up classical pragmatism in terms of African American feminist philosophy (see Chapter 10) (James 2009, 2013). Altogether, the overlap of American Philosophy of Race with classical and contemporary pragmatism has yielded a new comprehensive body of work.

Alain Locke was the first African American Rhodes scholar and he received his PhD in Philosophy from Harvard University. But because he was black, he was able to secure academic employment only in historically black colleges. He chaired the philosophy department of Howard University for 32 years, until 1953. Locke was famous as a founder of the Harlem Renaissance, supporting and helping to publicize the work of black novelists, poets, historians, and artists. The Harlem Renaissance began in the 1920s and flourished for about 12 years, becoming better known after it was over. Locke’s 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, was a focal point for the new identities and racial pride of the era. However, Locke disagreed with Du Bois about the purpose of creative projects: Du Bois insisted that black art have a political and moral message, but Locke emphasized the importance

of individual self-expression, with universal human themes (Du Bois 1897; Locke 1928). According to Locke, such self-expression was neither narcissistic nor frivolous, but could be a means for individual reflection and group development in racist society. Locke wrote:

Up to the present one may adequately describe the Negro's 'inner objectives' as an attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective. Their realization has acquired a new mentality for the American Negro. And as it matures we begin to see its effects; at first, negative, iconoclastic, and then positive and constructive. In this new group psychology we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness and 'touchy' nerves, the repudiation of the double standard of judgment with its special philanthropic allowances and in the sturdier desire for objective and scientific appraisal; and finally the rise from social disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution, and offsetting the necessary working commonsense acceptance of restricted conditions, the belief in ultimate esteem and recognition. Therefore, the Negro today wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not. (Locke 1925, p. 11)

In this passage, Locke describes and calls for internal psychological change through creative work. While this might have the same effect as what he called Du Bois's call for "propaganda," there is a strong implication that it would be more effective toward progress in race relations than propaganda, as well as positively changing how blacks viewed themselves.

Locke's philosophical career reflected broad social struggles of African Americans for intellectual recognition. Leonard Harris, who has researched both Locke's philosophy and his life, relates his distressing and moving experiences in retrieving Locke's legacy, in an essay aptly entitled, "Looking for Alain Locke." In 1983, Harris began his quest for Locke's philosophical work at the Alain Locke Archives at Howard University, the Beinecke Library, Yale University, and the Community Art Center in Chicago. Harris's search for Locke's work and his attempts to find a publisher for a biography about Locke was shadowed by his search for Locke's physical remains. It turned out that Locke's ashes had been kept in a can, in a paper bag, in an archive vault at Howard University, from his 1954 cremation until 2007—they were finally interred in the Congressional Cemetery in 2014 (Harris 2017). Harris finally succeeded in publishing both a biography of Locke and an anthology of philosophical commentary on Locke's work (Harris 2008, 1989/1999).

Jacoby Adeshi Carter, Harris's student and colleague, wrote a definitive exposition of Locke's work for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in 2012, an entry that informs, interprets, and analyses, as well as it vindicates. Through his graduate studies at Harvard, Locke was directly influenced by the classical pragmatists, Dewey, James, and Royce. Carter notes that although Locke was directly educated in pragmatism, Du Bois has been claimed as the primary pragmatist by philosophers of race. One reason for this is that Locke's work has been unavailable for so long, while Du Bois's writings were constantly in print over the twentieth century. Another reason is that Du Bois wrote as much for general readers as academics, whereas Locke's philosophical prose is not as accessible.

Locke's 1917 doctoral dissertation, *The Problem of Classification in Theory of Value*, was written under the advisement of Ralph Barton Perry (1876–1957), a student of William James, who specialized in pragmatic theories of value and perception. Locke argued that values are rooted in human attitudes as “emotionally mediated experience,” so that emotions determine values. Value-norms function as stereotypes for emotions and they determine habits of action. Value-modes are culturally, historically, and geographically relative. Based on experience, reason and judgment may enter into the assessment of a value-norm, but its mode, for instance, as aesthetic, logical, religious, or moral, cannot be changed by experience. The result of the functionality of value for Locke was that the same things could be valued in different ways. Also, the value-norm could be changed if its determining emotional attitude changed. Locke believed in pluralities of values and thought that obstacles to such plurality were based on *absolutism*, or an insistence of value uniformity, as well as dogmatic and arbitrary.

Carter further explains that Locke developed the concept of *ethnic race* as inherited identity that is primarily cultural and social, rather than biological. (With this view of the relationship between race and culture, Locke can be compared to Claude Lévi Strauss, who as we saw in Chapter 2, analyzed race as a construction of culture.) Locke rejected ideas that biological race could determine culture, but he also thought that both race and culture were unavoidable posits for understanding human groups. Carter quotes Locke from his 1924 essay, “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture”:

Most authorities are now reconciled to two things,—first, the necessity of a thorough-going redefinition of the nature of race, and second, the independent definition of race in the ethnic or social sense together with the independent investigation of its differences and their causes apart from the investigation of the factors and differentiae of physical race.

It is also interesting, as Carter further notes, that Locke thought each of the major race groups of his time had multiple ethnic races within them (Carter 2012).

Because Locke was not recognized as an academic philosopher during his time, he did not leave a legacy for subsequent pragmatist African American philosophers. William Fontaine, for instance, forged his academic career as a “first” African American philosopher. Bruce Kuklick begins his biography of Fontaine with a story about a trip to the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division meeting in December, 1948. William Fontaine, who at the time was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, got a ride to and from the conference at Charlottesville, Virginia, with his colleague Morton White and another famous philosopher, Nelson Goodman; A.J. Ayer joined them on the way back. When they arrived in Charlottesville, before going to the conference hotel, Fontaine’s colleagues had to drop him off at a hotel for blacks, because the city was segregated. When Fontaine made his way to the conference hotel, a white philosopher had to tell the doorman to let him in. Fontaine’s traveling companions were appalled and in 1949, the APA passed a resolution not to hold future meetings in segregated cities (Kuklick 2008, pp. 1–2). But the incident was emblematic of the pressures Fontaine continually faced, including the location of his office at the University of Pennsylvania, in a former broom closet, and his receiving tenure as an assistant professor, without promotion to associate.

Kuklick evaluates Fontaine’s 1942 article, “The Mind and Thought of the Negro,” and his 1944 “‘Social Determination’ in the Writings of Negro Scholars” as excellent contributions to sociology of knowledge and social psychology. But the work Fontaine presented to his colleagues over two decades, toward a book, *Reflections on Segregation, Desegregation, Power, and Morals* that he completed while ill with tuberculosis, was mediocre in comparison. While high ideals for racial harmony were expressed, the chapters did not connect coherently. Autobiography was intermingled with black history and public policy recommendations to desegregate housing, and Fontaine disparaged the Black Panthers as racist, throughout. Fontaine failed to appeal to a black audience whose demands for equality were intensifying, while at the same time failing to satisfy the restrictive disciplinary requirements of traditional mainstream analytic philosophers. *Reflections* was never reviewed and Fontaine died a year after it was published (Fontaine 1967; Kuklick 2008, pp. 119–24). Contemporary reviewers of Kuklick’s biography tend to view Fontaine as someone who failed to measure up in a cruel, racist profession (Allen 2009). The point may be that a mediocre white philos-

opher would have had a more successful career, but there is also an implication that Fontaine lacked integrity in caving into standards he did not whole-heartedly accept.

Between Fontaine's career and writing and the entry of African American philosophy into academic discourse, American thought about race became intensely politicized. To the extent that the civil rights movement and legislation have been followed by disappointing racial progress, it is now expected that even philosophical voices will have political relevance. And sometimes that relevance can be found in philosophical consideration of intellectuals, such as James Baldwin, who were not academic philosophers.

Baldwin's credentials for critical cultural analysis are evident through number of sources: his epistolary essay to his nephew, *The Fire Next Time*, his conversation with the anthropologist Margaret Mead in *Rap on Race*, his 1965 debate with conservative William Buckley at Cambridge University, and most recently, his reflections on race in the United States as compiled in the 2017 documentary, "I Am Not Your Negro." As Ulf Schulenberg writes in a 2007 essay in the *European Journal of American studies*: "[Baldwin's] politicized version of self-creation makes it seem legitimate to advance the argument that he is part of a left-liberal tradition of worldly pragmatism that sees the work of the strong poet or creative redecriber as contributing to political and social change" (Schulenberg 2007).

Baldwin expressed several major themes throughout his creative career: White Americans, especially as depicted in Hollywood movies, live in a fantasy world of effortless consumption and democracy among themselves, with no awareness of the suffering of people of color that makes this possible (Als 2017). The American Dream for white people has been created by uncompensated and unrecognized black labor (Baldwin and Buckley 1965). The history of African Americans literally lives on in their individual lives in the present, in their visible physical racial traits and their experience of the normality of violent expressions of racism, especially by police officers (Baldwin and Mead 1970).

By the time of Cornel West's rise as a scholar and public intellectual, issues of race had entered philosophy and discourse about race in the pragmatic philosophical tradition had become fully politicized. West studied at Yale University and has taught at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard University, and Princeton University. He has taught in departments of religion and African American Studies, but many philosophers of race have claimed him. Although, West says about himself: "I'm a blues man in the life of the mind. I'm a jazz man in the world of ideas" (West 2015).

West is one of the most well-known African Americans of arts and letters in his generation, regularly presenting his thought in television and radio shows and interviews, and performing with a band called “Cornel West Theory” and as “Councilor West” in the movies “Matrix Reloaded” and “Matrix Revolutions.” His speech and writing are oratorical and span the history of Western humanism. West is in that sense the Du Bois of the twenty-first century, calling for hope and telling Americans, from ordinary people to President Barack Obama, how they are obligated to help the poor and “redignify human suffering.” West thus preaches, as much as he teaches, based on a core commitment to altruistic socialism and Christianity, as well as a somber appreciation of human tragedy. In his first book, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, he wrote:

The object of inquiry for Afro-American critical thought is the past and the present, the doings and the sufferings of African people in the United States. Rather than a new scientific discipline or field of study, it is a genre of writing, a textuality, a mode of discourse that interprets, describes, and evaluates Afro-American life in order comprehensively to understand and effectively to transform it. It is not concerned with “foundations” or transcendental “grounds” but with how to build its language in such a way that the configuration of sentences and the constellation of paragraphs themselves create a textuality and distinctive discourse which are a material force for Afro-American freedom. (West 1982, p. 15)

West continually refers to black **prophecy**, not as prediction of the future, but as a critical description of the past and present that will allow for change in the future. In *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*, West criticized academic pragmatist philosophers for failing to attend to social conditions in reality. Instead, he insisted: “[Prophetic pragmatism] analyzes the social causes of unnecessary forms of social misery, promotes moral outrage against them, organizes different constituencies to alleviate them, yet does so with an openness to its own blindnesses and shortcomings” (West 1993, p. 139).

Part of taking up prophetic pragmatism requires an understanding of what West calls “black prophetic fire” as a driving force for liberation by African Americans in the past. In *Black Prophetic Fire*, a dialogue with Christa Buschendorf, West discusses the work and activism of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and Ida B. Wells. West gives the iconic figures—Douglass, Du Bois, King, and Malcolm X—their due, but he goes further in drawing out the contributions of Ella Baker and Ida B. Wells. He attributes Wells’s courageously fiery anti-lynch-

ing campaign to the power of her Christian faith, remarking: “She said: ‘We want a higher moral ground, but I’m going to hit this issue head-on’” (West and Buschendorf 2014, p. 141). In a different tone, West contrasts the steadfast, unselfish contributions of Ella Baker to those of King and narcissistic contemporary activists, describing her as “an unassuming person who helps the suppressed to help themselves” (West and Buschendorf 2014, p. 90).

West also cautions that the success of prophecy is not a smooth path. In his address to 3000 people at Riverside Church in New York City, for a 2011 event commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the 1971 riot in Attica Prison, West counseled endurance and awareness of possible defeat:

We’re going to have a new wave of truth telling. We’re going to have a new wave of witness bearing. And we’re going to teach the younger generation that these brothers didn’t struggle in vain, just like John Brown and Nat Turner and Marcus Garvey and Martin King and Myles Horton and the others didn’t. And we shall see what happens. We might get crushed, too. But you know what? Then you just go down swinging, like Ella Fitzgerald and Muhammad Ali. (Goodman and González 2011)

In concluding our discussion of pragmatism and Philosophy of Race, we turn to the connection V. Denise James draws between nineteenth century African American feminist, Anna J. Cooper and classical pragmatist William James, who also founded modern psychology as an academic discipline. James contrasts Cooper’s appeal to faith with William James’s, in that Cooper argued for moral grounds for belief, while James aimed to produce intellectual ones (James 2013). The way that James puts Cooper in dialogue with William James is part of a broader project of black feminist pragmatism that is visionary in engaging the social change mission of classical pragmatism (James 2009).

## Existential Phenomenology and Race

Existential phenomenology has been an effective methodology for examining the experience of race from the standpoint of individuals. As such, universal structures of human consciousness are relied upon to examine relationships, reactions, and constructions of identity in societies that are already formed around pervasive racial differences and racist beliefs about them. Contemporary writers have used texts from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Frantz Omar Fanon

(1925–1961) as philosophical starting points for questions about freedom. There has also been a religious tradition that resonates with the kinds of spiritual egalitarianism discussed in Chapter 2.

Hegel's description of the "master-slave" dialectic has riveted the attention of many analytic, as well as continental philosophers of race (Baur 2014; Brandom 2007; Kojève 1969; McDowell 2006; Moyer 2008; Pinkard 1994; Pippin 2010; Stern 2002; Westphal 2003, 2009). To understand this broad engagement, it helps to recall Frederick Douglass's (1818–1895) real-life encounter with the slave-breaker, Edward Covey. When he was about seventeen, Douglass was leased by his owner to work for Covey. He endured hard labor under harsh and unsympathetic conditions and after one particularly brutal beating walked seven miles to appeal to his owner to intervene. His owner sent him back to Covey, who soon after prepared to beat him, again. That was when Douglass resisted. He fought with Covey, and ended up getting the better of him. And Covey never touched him again. Douglass wrote:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free... It was a glorious resurrection from the tomb of slavery to the heaven of freedom. (Douglass 1845, pp. 62–3)

What did Hegel say that gives Douglass's fight with Covey deep philosophical importance? In Chapter 4 of *Phenomenology of Spirit* or *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel's subject is "Lord and Bondsman," which has been interpreted as "master and slave."

The one is independent, and its essential nature is to be for itself; the other is dependent, and its essence is life or existence for another. The former is the Master, or Lord, the latter the Bondsman. ... The master is the consciousness that exists for itself ... a consciousness existing on its own account which is mediated with itself through another consciousness, i.e. through another whose very nature implies that it is bound up with an independent being or with thinghood in general. ... The bondsman being a self-consciousness in the broad sense, also takes up a negative attitude to things and cancels them; but the thing is, at the same time, independent for him and, in consequence, he cannot, with all his negating, get so far as to annihilate it outright and be done with it; that is to say, he merely works on it. To the master, on the other hand, by means of this mediating process, belongs the immediate relation, in the sense of the pure negation of it, in other words he gets the enjoyment.

...

In all this, the unessential consciousness is, for the master, the object which embodies the truth of his certainty of himself. But it is evident that this object does not correspond to its notion; for, just where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. ... The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman. This doubtless appears in the first instance outside itself, and not as the truth of self-consciousness. But just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence. ... Thus precisely in labor where there seemed to be merely some outsider's mind and ideas involved, the bondsman becomes aware, through this re-discovery of himself by himself, of having and being a "mind of his own". (Hegel 1910, pp. 108–15)

In these passages (—dense, opaque, and well-mined by scholars—), Hegel describes the complexity of human recognition and domination. The lord is free but he needs the bondsman's consciousness to be aware of his freedom and that limits his freedom, because the bondsman is not free. The bondsman has the same relation to the things he works on, as the lord has to him, and he discovers his own freedom and mind, through that work.

Hegel's "master-slave analysis" is important in terms of consciousness and human relations: Consciousness of anything requires self-consciousness. Self-consciousness requires recognition from others. The lord/master requires recognition from the bondsman/slave. However, domination is not absolute, because what a dominated person does creates self-consciousness or awareness of the self. Hegel's analysis of consciousness was very influential for subsequent theorists of dominance, as well as of consciousness and human relations, more generally.

Returning to Douglass and Covey, we can see that Covey could not dominate Douglass without Douglass's cooperation—Douglass had to recognize Covey as dominating him and he had to do the work Covey ordered him to do. More than that, although Douglass describes himself as having been demoralized by his hard work and cruel treatment under Covey, he achieved enough domination over things and himself through that experience to effectively follow through with his choice to resist Covey on the day of the fight. This is not to suggest that conditions under the evils of slavery were redemptive for slaves, but it does highlight the importance of choice for psychological as well as physical freedom. Sartre constructed a philosophy of freedom in exactly that sense.

In his influential 1945 address, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre presented his doctrine of absolute, universal human freedom and responsibility:

In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait. No doubt this thought may seem comfortless to one who has not made a success of his life. On the other hand, it puts everyone in a position to understand that reality alone is reliable; that dreams, expectations and hopes serve to define a man only as deceptive dreams, abortive hopes, and expectations unfulfilled; that is to say, they define him negatively, not positively. Nevertheless, when one says, “You are nothing else but what you live,” it does not imply that an artist is to be judged solely by his works of art, for a thousand other things contribute no less to his definition as a man. . . . [A] man is no other than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organisation, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings. (Sartre 1945, p. 9)

Sartre also presented a metaphysics that supported his idea of radical freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, he divided the world into two “regions of being,” the “for-itself” or consciousness, and the “in-itself,” the realm of everything that consciousness could be conscious of, including its own past states. From the standpoint of consciousness, the in-itself is inert and can have no effect on the consciousness that is conscious of it. Freedom resides in consciousness, as consciousness of something other than itself in the moment of self-awareness (Sartre 1984, 3–33). Consciousness, or the for-itself, is not a thing but a nothingness. It is this nothingness that we are, which is absolutely free and which makes us responsible for our lives. However, we are always in an historical situation that limits our choices at any given time (Sartre 1984, 127–33).

The structure of consciousness as described by Sartre allows for *bad faith*, a flight of consciousness by pretending that it is an in-itself. Failure to acknowledge our situation is one form of bad faith and pretending that our situation makes freedom impossible is another. Sartre also distinguishes between “cowards” and “swine” in types of bad faith: the coward denies and suppresses his own freedom; the swine denies and oppresses the freedom of others (Sartre 1984, 86–119). Racism exhibits bad faith, as Sartre illustrates in *Anti-Semite and Jew* with his portrait of the French anti-Semite who presents himself as “the true Frenchman”:

The true Frenchman, rooted in his province, in his country, borne along by a tradition twenty centuries old, benefiting from ancestral wisdom, guided by tried customs, does not need intelligence. His virtue depends upon the assimilation of the qualities which the work of a hundred generations has lent to the

objects which surround him; it depends on property. It goes without saying that this is a matter of inherited property, not property one buys. (Sartre 1944, p. 16)

In his 1995 *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, Lewis Gordon analyzes US antiblack racism as Sartrean bad faith that constructs black people as inferior and sub-human (Gordon 1995).

Frantz Fanon approached racism from a more concrete phenomenological perspective than Sartre's, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describing the experience of being made an object of racism by a white person:

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema.

...

'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

'Look, a Negro!' It was true. It amused me.

'Look, a Negro!' The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. ...

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, It's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little

boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up. (Fanon 1952, pp. 83–6)

In these passages, Fanon discloses how his bodily freedom and agency is limited by the reaction of a white child to him—"My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored." However, Fanon did not follow Sartre's ideal of absolute freedom in terms of black identity (a dispute that we will take up in Chapter 6).

Black religious or theological existentialism adds striving toward liberation to the black egalitarian tradition discussed in Chapter 2. As noted, in *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois reported on the importance of the black church for community organization in the late nineteenth century. Black

churches were centers for activism that provided refuge, through the civil rights movement. The spiritual support expressed in practical life was developed in the writings of distinctly American black existentialist philosophers. *In Black Theology and Black Power*, written after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, James Cone drew on the work of both religious and atheist European existentialists to insist that God's people are all oppressed people, and in the United States, black people are oppressed. His message of revolution against white racism was based on moral teachings in the bible, but he emphasized the importance of earthly struggle:

The free Christian man cannot be concerned about a reward in heaven. Rather, he is a man who, through the freedom granted in Christ, is ready to plunge himself into the evils of the world, revolting against all inhuman powers which enslave men. (Cone 1969, p. 125)

Dwayne Tunstall has developed religious phenomenological existentialism by engaging writings from the Christian existentialist Gabriel Honoré Marcel and from Lewis Gordon. Tunstall combines Marcel's task of participating in being and the resistance of dehumanization through Gordon's account of bad faith for an explanation of how antiblack racism results in dehumanization of blacks, globally, as well as in the United States (Tunstall 2013).

## Conclusion

Both American philosophy, including pragmatism, and continental philosophy in its strain of existential phenomenology, add important dimensions of lived experience to ideas about race, which are not present in purely cognitive analyses. The American philosophical contribution is closely tied to the struggles of African American thinkers as individuals and members of a group experiencing ongoing oppression. By comparison, the continental approach in its existentialist derivation from Husserlian phenomenology may seem more theoretical, and austere in the responsibility Sartre places on individuals. However, theological existentialist perspectives have served to take up belief and faith in ways that resonate with earlier American egalitarian traditions. Thus far in our chapters, the discussion of race, overall, has either been limited to abstract social systems of race and the concrete black-white binary. To further broaden the perspective for Philosophy of Race, Chapter 5 will focus on different race-like ideas, in both the American past and other parts of the world, which nonetheless share much with the ideas dealt with thus far.

## Glossary

**American philosophy**—work by philosophers in the United States which is nationally distinctive in **pragmatic**, method or US-related subject matter.

**destiny**—fate, what will necessarily happen in the future, what will happen because of some force in control of events.

**existentialism**—philosophical focus on human experience in existing, with attention to the structures of consciousness that enable that experience.

**phenomenology**—philosophical practice of describing the objects of consciousness while bracketing their existence or objectivity.

**prophecy**—prediction of the future, but according to Cornel West, criticism of past and present to motivate action for a better future.

**pragmatism**—American philosophical tradition sharing a principle that claims, concepts, and hypotheses need to be understood in terms of their consequences in reality.

**rhetoric**—speech of a writer or speaker aiming to educate, persuade, and motivate an audience in a particular context.

## Discussion Questions

1. What do Du Bois and Husserl share in their methods and what is different?
2. What did Du Bois mean by racial destiny? Evaluate this idea.
3. How did Du Bois and Locke differ about the aims of art?
4. What does Douglass's fight with Covey mean in Hegel's terms of the master-slave relationship?
5. How do Sartre's ideas of absolute freedom apply to race?
6. Give three examples of bad faith and racism from your own experience and explain how and why they are bad faith.
7. What does Frantz Fanon's account of how others see him imply about racist societies?
8. Explain how Cornel West's idea of prophecy is about the future.
9. How is black theology different from egalitarian theology as described in Chapter 2.
10. How do you relate the treatment of race in this chapter to the scientific approaches in Chapter 3. Are they compatible?

## References

- Allen, Anita L. "Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine by Bruce Kuklick." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 133, no. 2, Apr. 2009, pp. 213–5.
- Als, Hilton. "Capturing James Baldwin's Legacy Onscreen." *New Yorker Magazine*, Feb. 13 and 20, 2017 Issue. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/capturing-james-baldwins-legacy-onscreen>.
- Baldwin, James, and William F. Buckley. "James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley: Has the American Dream Been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro?" Cambridge University, 1965, Youtube, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w>.
- Baldwin, James, and Margaret Mead. *Rap on Race*. New York, NY: Mass Market Paperback, 1970.
- Baur, Michael, editor. *G.W.F. Hegel: Key Concepts*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.
- Brandom, Robert. 2007. "The Structure of Desire and Recognition. Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 33, pp. 127–50.
- Carter, Jacoby Adeshei. "Alain Leroy Locke." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 13, 2012. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alain-locke/>.
- Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*, edited by Robert O'Meally. Boston: Barnes and Nobles. Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.
- Du Bois, W.E. Burghardt. *The Conservation of Races*. The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers, No. 2, Washington, DC: Published by the Academy, 1897, Online Source: Project Gutenberg: [www.gutenberg.org/etext/31254](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/31254).
- Du Bois, W.E. Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg, 1904, 5th ed.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Superior Race (An Essay)." *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness*, vol. 70, no. 4, Apr. 1923, pp. 55–60. <http://www.webDuBois.org/dbSuperiorRace.html>.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, edited by E. Digby Balzell. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1967.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1952/1968.
- Fontaine, William T. "The Mind and Thought of the Negro of the United States as Revealed in Imaginative Literature, 1876–1940," *Southern University Bulletin* 28, Mar. 1942, pp. 5–50. See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/fontaine-william-thomas-1909-1968#sthash.lMwYs3ih.dpuf>.
- Fontaine, William T. *Reflections on Segregation, Desegregation, Power and Morals*. Chicago, IL: Thomas, 1967.

- Goodman, Amy, and Juan González. "Attica Is All of Us: Cornel West on 40th Anniversary of Attica Prison Rebellion." *Democracy Now!: A Daily Independent Global News Hour*, 2011. [https://www.democracynow.org/2011/9/12/attica\\_is\\_all\\_of\\_us\\_cornel](https://www.democracynow.org/2011/9/12/attica_is_all_of_us_cornel).
- Gordon, Lewis R. *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995.
- Gorman, Robert A. "The Phenomenological 'Humanization' of Social Science—A Critique." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 26, no. 4, Dec. 1975, pp. 389–405.
- Harris, Leonard, editor. *The Philosophy of Alain Locke, Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989; Republished as Harris, Leonard, editor. *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.
- Harris, Leonard. "Looking for Alain Locke." *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by Naomi Zack, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 125–33.
- Harris, Leonard, and C. Molesworth, *Alain LeRoy Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2008.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Translated by J.B. Baillie. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1910/2003.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*. Translated by D. Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, [1936/54], 1970.
- James, V. Denise. "Theorizing Black Feminist Pragmatism: Forethoughts on the Practice and Purpose of Philosophy as Envisioned by Black Feminists and John Dewey." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New Series, vol. 23, no. 2, 2009, pp. 92–9.
- James, V. Denise. "Reading Anna J. Cooper with William James: Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatism, Philosophy's Culture of Justification, and Belief." *The Pluralist*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2013, pp. 32–45.
- Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Translated by J.H. Nichols, Jr., and edited by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1969.
- Kuklick, Bruce. *Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Locke, Alain, editor. *The New Negro*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1925.
- Locke, Alain. "Art or Propaganda." *Harlem*, vol. I, no. 1, Nov. 1928, in National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, the Making of African American Identity: Vol. III, 1917–1968. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text10/lockeartorpropaganda.pdf>.
- McDowell, John. H. 2006. "The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox Reading of 'Lordship and Bondage' in Hegel's Phenomenology." *Hegel: New Directions*, edited by Katerina Deligiorgi. Chesham: Acumen, pp. 33–48.

- Morris, Aldon. *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015.
- Moyar, Dean, and Michael Quante, editors. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Pippin, Robert R. *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism Is a Humanism." *Existentialism and Humanism*, academia.edu, edited by P. Mairet. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1945. [http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/4716326/sartre.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1497380852&Signature=ddEEfmeuOiVCOtoHsuisbsJ3dBE%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DExistentialism\\_is\\_a\\_Humanism.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/4716326/sartre.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1497380852&Signature=ddEEfmeuOiVCOtoHsuisbsJ3dBE%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DExistentialism_is_a_Humanism.pdf).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes, New York, NY: Gallimard, 1943/1946/1984.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Anti-semitism and Jew*. Translated by George J. Becker. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1944/1948.
- Schulenberg, Ulf. "Speaking Out of the Most Passionate Love"—James Baldwin and Pragmatism." *European Journal of American studies* [Online], 2–2|2007, document 3, Online Since 5 November 2007, Connection on 12 June 2017. <http://ejas.revues.org/1333>.
- Shenk, Timothy. "Booked #4: What Did Race Mean to W.E.B. Du Bois?" (Interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah About His book, *Lines of Descent: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.) *Dissent*, May 7, 2015.
- Stern, Robert. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Tunstall, Dwayne. *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking About Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiracist Racism*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013.
- West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982.
- West, Cornel. *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.
- West, Cornel with Christa Buschendorf. *Black Prophetic Fire*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014.
- West, Cornel. "Dr. Cornel West: Official Website." <http://www.cornelwest.com/index.html#.VRjkU7l0zcs>. Accessed Mar. 29, 2015.
- Westphal, Kenneth R. *Hegel's Epistemology: A Philosophical Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003.
- Westphal, Kenneth R., editor. *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009.