

The Virtues of Avoiding the Danger of Whitewashing

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The motivation for Lawrence Blum's approach in "Race, Virtue, and Moral Education" is his concern that the field of moral education pays far too little attention to the problem of racism. I share this concern wholeheartedly: it is a serious flaw that warrants both critique and remedy. I also want to acknowledge that I count Blum's work for the last several years as a significant exception to this criticism. To me, he is the epitome of a philosopher who takes racism seriously as a moral education problem, not only in his academic writings, but also in his educational practice — which includes *high school teaching*. As I also take some of my recent work as a small exception, but in a somewhat different direction from that of Blum, I will draw on some of it in this response.¹ I intend the spirit of my comments to be that of complementing what he is trying to do in this paper.

I think it is important to note that Blum makes two creative contributions in this paper. To make room for the kind of virtue he thinks is needed, Blum first makes four important suggestions about loosening the standard criteria for identifying virtues. The fact that for reasons of space I will concentrate on his main substantive suggestion about virtue in the context of racism should not be taken as overlooking the importance of these suggestions. In fact, it is because I *accept* them that I am given room to reflect seriously and critically about the substance of his second contribution.

Before introducing his suggested new virtue of "welcoming of Blackness," Blum suggests several different explanations for why racism is so seldom dealt with in moral education. I think he is probably correct that all of them make a contribution to this lack, but of particular importance is the tendency of many teachers to appeal to "color-blindness" as an assumed virtue. I want to add another one, however, as I suspect it underlies this appeal, if not the others as well. In my work on teachers' beliefs about the aims of education I have found some empirical support for the suspicion that very few teachers actually seem to have what I think is a necessary conceptual lens to interpret adequately how racism works in the world.² In short, very few volunteer any awareness of racism as a structural, systemic power relationship between *groups* that have been historically defined in terms of each other. The false virtue of color-blindness gets a grip on these teachers in part *because* of this conceptual deficiency. Interpreting all human relationships as ultimately reducible to dyadic relationships between discrete individuals, these teachers can reduce racism to prejudices that are superficially related to skin color, which then reduces their moral responsibility to that of ignoring these superficialities. In short, this conceptual deficiency in how racism is understood allows a person — particularly a person who wants to think of him/herself as "good" through sincere moral education efforts — to escape the heavy burdens of recognizing oneself as embedded in on-going oppressive racialized relations and to "race to the high moral ground" of blindness to its deep harm.

This observation grounds both a worry that I have about Blum's proposed virtue of "welcoming of Blackness" and my subsequent suggestions concerning some other kinds of changes that might be needed before it could be seen as a good thing, at least in most people that I know. In raising this worry, and in proposing some alternatives to consider, I do not mean to undercut the spirit of what Blum is up to. Rather, I just want to point to some cautions about how we seek to enact that aim.

First, I must qualify my reference to "most people." I mean to refer only to most *white* people. I do not see any tension with Blum here. In fact, he seems to me to skate over another modification to standard virtue ethics that he is assuming to make his proposal: the virtue he proposes seems to me clearly available to only some people, not all people as in the standard view. In short, "welcoming of Blackness" can be a virtue *only* for white people (or "non-Blacks" as he says, though I will focus on whiteness). Certainly this is the way he talks, but clearly he would be in an untenable position if he were to deny this. If he were to make a more universalizing claim, it would mean that any Black person who saw his/her racialized identity primarily in a negative light would then be exhibiting a vice. I see no reason to add this description to the burden of Black people, and I am confident that Blum would agree.

But this particular asymmetry worries me considerably. Since to exhibit any virtue consistently and appropriately is to position oneself in that respect as a *good person*, as a candidate for legitimate praise, I worry that once again whiteness is defining itself in terms of its (asymmetrical) claim on goodness.³ This worry is exacerbated by my gut reaction to the phrase Blum chooses to label his proposed virtue. Maybe this is only my problem, and I am *sure* he does not mean this connotation, but the image that immediately springs to mind is that of a neighborhood "welcome wagon" delegation. Here I see a nice (white, nuclear) family ringing the doorbell of a new family just moved into the neighborhood and extending welcome through a macaroni-and-cheese casserole and a loaf of Wonderbread. I realize that this may be over the top a bit. But my point is that the positioning of differently racialized persons differentially in terms of this virtue has real potential dangers. For those white people who do not have the requisite conceptual understanding of how racism is a kind of relation between *groups* and at least some awareness of how they are part of this relational harm, "welcoming of Blackness" could easily be perverted to yet another avenue for "whitewash."

Blum argues, and I agree, that we need to think of some virtues as more "context-dependent." As a more positive development of what Blum seems to me to be working toward, I want to point to aspects of context that need more attention on the part of white people for any "welcoming of Blackness" to have a chance of being — and being perceived as — genuine. In short, I submit that any attempt to identify virtues that would not run the risk of doing more harm than good in the context of contemporary North American society *must* start with deep appreciation of the implications of the historical construction of whiteness-in-relation-to-Blackness within which any virtue must work. Perhaps this could be read into what Blum means, but I think it too important to remain implicit.

But what could this requirement mean? Blum argues, correctly I think, that what he is after shares with the traditional view of virtues the assumption that exhibiting

the virtue is “only partly within the scope of the will. One cannot just *choose* to welcome Blackness. To do so requires engagement with one’s characteristic ways of thinking about, regarding, and responding to Black people.” But what if, for most if not all white people, the existing way of thinking about Black people is corrupt to the core? I believe that it is — and that combating this corruption is a deeply difficult problem. To move in the direction of having “characteristic ways of thinking about, regarding, and responding” that enable “welcoming of Blackness” to be a virtue that minimizes the whitewashing danger requires white people to reorient themselves in the world in significant ways. I think that a major part of the performative *meaning* of being white in this society is an understanding of oneself as legitimately claiming the center-in-relation-to-Blackness in myriad ways. And the center, by definition, is not the margin, not suspect, not guilty. Thus I think that thinking about virtues in this context must *start* with some kind of cognitive gestalt switch that involves a variety of kinds of “off-centering” of one’s understanding of oneself for white people. Part of this off-centering, or at least a necessary concomitant, would be more openness to complicity in oppressive race relations and, in Larry May’s words, to “moral taint” and shame.⁴

So, then, what might be some virtues that would surface? What would they look like? I think one common characteristic of any that would meet the requirement just laid down is that they would be far more self-reflexively negative than what is connoted to me by “welcoming of Blackness.” Substantial self-critical work needs to be done before assuming the mantle of looking good again. I do not know whether the things that I have in mind are appropriately called virtues, but I do think they would need to be in place much more before anything else could legitimately earn that title. I also do not know what to call them, and suspect my suggestions will grate on some ears. But I do have some in mind. I would argue for the development in white people of characteristic ways of understanding themselves in relation to Black people that are picked out by such phrases as “fungibility sensitivity,” “symmetrical reciprocity suspicion,” and “acceptance of proxy-action responsibility.”⁵ These all *start* from a combined conceptual and emotional embeddedness in the historical project of racial oppression as it structures social relations in this society. This is what I would truly welcome.

1. For example, see Dwight Boyd, “A Question of Adequate Aims,” *Journal of Moral Education* 25, no. 1 (1996): 21-29; Dwight Boyd and Mary Louise Arnold, “Teachers’ Beliefs, Anti-racism, and Moral Education: Problems of Intersection,” *Journal of Moral Education* 29, no. 1 (2000): 23-45; and Dwight Boyd, “The Legacies of Liberalism and Oppressive Relations: Facing a Dilemma for the Subject of Moral Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 33, no. 4 (2004): 3-22.

2. See Boyd and Arnold, “Teachers’ Beliefs.”

3. For two different analyses of how this works, see Carol Schick, “‘By Virtue of Being White’: Resistance in Anti-racist Pedagogy,”

Race Ethnicity and Education 3, no. 1 (2000): 83-102 and Audrey Thompson, “Tiffany, Friend of People of Color: White Investments in Antiracism,” *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 7-29.

4. Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

5. Here I am drawing on Iris Marion Young’s argument against the possibility of symmetrical reciprocity in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).