

A Rawlsian Response to Racism

Victor L. Worsfold
University of Texas, Dallas

As I understand the main thrust of Stephen Nathan Haymes's essay, it is a lament about the lack of self-respect engendered by Paulo Freire's pedagogy when that pedagogy is brought to bear on the education of black people in America. The penultimate sentence of Haymes's central claim about that pedagogy reads: "Freire's pedagogy of race neglects the ontological content of racist epistemologies and beliefs, which question *the worth of a people* [my emphasis], and causes them to [have to] justify their existence on a daily basis." Because the lived experience of the black is such, "*the worth of black people*" [my emphasis] is constantly called into question." According to Haymes, this results from black people being diminished to physical bodies. "And a body that is without thought is a body that is incapable of representing itself as an 'I' and as such is a body that is absent of a self." The upshot of this condition for black people, Haymes tells us, is a dehumanized world which is anti-black, where "black people function neither as the [one who] *recognizes*, nor the [one who] is *recognized*."

In my response to Haymes, I do not want to question his reading of Freire's pedagogy, but rather accept it and make some suggestions about how one might repair the state of affairs Haymes alleges results from this *lacuna* for blacks; namely, what I call the lack of self-respect among blacks. To effect this work of repair, I first would point Haymes to some recent work by John Rawls, who takes up Hegel in the last of his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, the very figure to whom Haymes turns, correctly it will turn out, for conceptual help in dealing with the problem Freire's thinking bequeaths to Haymes.¹

In these last lectures, Rawls is explaining how *A Theory of Justice* follows Hegel in his belief that people start realizing themselves rooted in society. Thus, "the concepts of person and society fit together; each requires the other and neither stand alone" (*LH*, 366). And the main instrument of persons for realizing themselves, Rawls believes Hegel to argue, is their bodies. Rawls writes,

I become objective to myself in my body. But from the point of view of others, I am in effect a free being in my body and my possession of it is immediate, a matter of course. So my body is the first embodiment of my freedom....Not to be allowed to own a body at all is to be killed (*LH*, 342).

Here, Rawls might be interpreted to be talking solely about a person's physical body. But, he continues, perhaps aware of this possible interpretation, "We show respect for persons by showing respect for the integrity of their bodies" (*LH*, 343). This respect we accomplish by not injuring, nor harming, nor enslaving persons' bodies, any of which might be done by persons to themselves.

In order to understand the underlying Hegelian thought here, I fear we must at least allude to what Rawls admits is a very difficult passage in the *Philosophy of Right*, namely, "the free will is the will that wills itself as the free will" (*LH*, 336). But Rawls helps us wrestle with this aphorism. Suffice it to say that Rawls's

understanding is that the free will wills itself as the free will, first, when it wills a system of political and social institutions within which it can be free—important to Rawls for his own work in political philosophy, but a crucial first step towards the development of self-respect, for only within such a set of institutions can self-respect flourish. The free will wills itself as a free will when, next, it makes the ends these institutions serve its own ends; that is, a free will to be free must be at one with the purposes of the institutions under which that will must live. And, finally, the free will wills itself as a free will “when it is...willing a system of institutions within which it is *educated* (Rawls’s emphasis) to the concepts of itself as a free will by various public features of these institutions” because these institutions express the concept of free will (*LH*, 338).

In the context of Haymes’s essay, what this Hegelian thinking interpreted by Rawls provides is a conceptual proposal whereby blacks can recognize themselves as thinking bodies, thinking bodies who can self-consciously go about the business of indicating how these bodies are to be treated, first by themselves, then by others. Perhaps more importantly, this Hegelian-Rawlsian thinking provides blacks the social arrangements whereby they can educate themselves and others by participating in the instituting and perpetuating of these arrangements which they themselves under this proposal would design to express their worth as persons, precisely what black citizens need. In fact, Rawls, in his recently published *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, has written that one of the primary goals of the social life of a decent society is the provision by that society of the social bases of self-respect, a self-respect which Rawls characterizes now as a lively sense of one’s worth as “a person and the ability to advance one’s ends with self-confidence.”² I believe it is to just this kind of decent society to which the implementation of the Hegelian-Rawlsian proposal would lead. In Haymes’s language, the proposal would lead to the realization of bodily consciousness that is a self-consciousness of bodies as bodies for selves and not for others. And that embodiment of self is now a reflective self-consciousness that can take steps to honor that “consciousness of consciousness” in the development of social arrangements that encourage “reciprocal recognition” of the worth of black people by themselves and others, that is, provide a social basis for self-respect.

Now the skeptics will say that such thinking as this is merely utopian. But, again, Rawls can help us with his idea of a “realistic utopia”—“realistic” meaning that the arrangements lately noted could come to pass and “utopia” indicating the highly desirable outcome of instituting social conditions which enable citizens to realize their fundamental interests as human beings.³ If such thinking is not to devolve into Donaldo Macedo’s warning, quoted by Haymes, that discussion of lived experience can quickly be exoticized into group therapy and so realistically utopian thinking quashed, then blacks must, I believe, attend to Haymes’s recognition of Freire’s truism “that reflective consciousness is bound up with the human capacity to know.” If the Hegelian-Rawlsian proposal is correct, then what reflective consciousness must learn is self-respect. And that, I believe, will require more than the epistemological curiosity of which Haymes writes. That will depend on imagination—intellectual imagination.

To be sure, for the attribute of self-respect to be understood as needed, epistemological curiosity must be aroused. There must occur some kind of epistemological crisis—some kind of breakdown of belief about the way one is behaving towards oneself that occasions the realization that some kind of alternative self-treatment is necessary. Following this realization, there must occur learning to understand an alternative which may well be incommensurable with one's original set of beliefs about self-treatment. Consider what a black auto worker, mired in the Detroit car factory's view of his self must have to undertake intellectually to throw off "niggermentation." To borrow and paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of an epistemological crisis:

It is by such uses of the imagination that one can come as if to inhabit another alien culture and in so doing recognize how significant features of one's own [work] culture to which one has hitherto been blind and could not [given that work culture's predominant role in one's life] but have been blind, can be discovered and characterized from that other [self-respecting] culture's point of view.⁴

Lacking the imagination to comprehend the other, self-respecting, culture, blacks may be unaware of what MacIntyre calls "the radical particularities and partialities of their own standpoint," in this case, the much dehumanized sense of self in their own culture.⁵

Freeing themselves from this trap will most certainly require the virtues of honesty about oneself, courage—intellectual and moral courage, and a sense of moral integrity on the part of blacks. There is certainly no room for magic or naïveté here. Reflective self-consciousness, suffused by the kind of imagination that permits the realization of the possibility of self-respect must be at the center of their education if blacks are to escape the self-demeaning condition of anti-black racism. Let there be no more talk of "niggermentation."

1. John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 329-71. This book will be cited as *LH* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 59.

3. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 120.

5. *Ibid.*, 121.