

Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr. On why Racism makes No Sense

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Abstract

In this interview with W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University, Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr, we discuss the metaphysical and ethical questions of grouping and classifying people in terms of race and ethnicity. Outlaw is the author of [On Race and Philosophy] and one of the recognised pioneers of Africana Philosophy. Outlaw talks about growing up in racial segregation in Starkville, Mississippi, the Black Power movement, the notion of the Black intellectual, scholarship and teaching, and philosophizing about race. We discuss the ambiguity of the concept of *philosophy of race* and explore the concepts of *raciality*, *categories*, *human sociality*, *evolution*, and *oppression*. With his philosophical, political, and sociological influences, Outlaw asserts that racism makes no sense at all because the diversity of our species is one of our greatest assets; and in terms of survival, we are all of the same species though certain group-shared differences do matter.

Keywords: Black consciousness, race, philosophy, social constructionism, evolution

Outlaw's Philosophical Background

Interviewer 1 (I1): What got you into philosophy and pursuit of a career in this academic field?

Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr. (LO): Actually, much of my response to these questions is in the "Preface" to my book [On Race and Philosophy]. Here, then, a brief recapitulation. I was born and raised in one of the states in the United States of America, Mississippi, that has long had a well-earned reputation as one of the most racially pernicious states in terms of institutionalizations of violent White Racial Supremacy. A substantial number of people in the state have been and are persons of African descent. It is also one of the poorest and most backward of US states in terms of measures of the conditions for human well-being.

Growing up in my hometown of Starkville, what never made sense to me was invidious racial segregation enforced with violence. I just couldn't make sense of why enforced racial segregation made sense to White folks, particularly since in my school we were studying United States civics and the principles, supposedly, on which the nation was founded, principles affirming democratic freedom and rights *for all*. Definitely, this was *not* the case for Negroes (now "Black" folks). Furthermore, not only did invidious racial segregation not make sense to me and close friends in my school cohort, as we became adolescents and discussed racial segregation, we were convinced that it was also not fair, not right.

I was also raised in a Negro Baptist church, Second Missionary Baptist Church. My father was the janitor of the largest White Baptist church in Starkville, First Baptist Church. (I started working there when I was nine years old.) The reality that on Sundays Negro people were in racially segregated Negro churches and White people were in racially segregated White churches yet, supposedly, all were worshipping *the same* God just did not make sense to me. If God had created all peoples, all races, why were there restrictions that separated peoples by race? Overall, then, the various invidious ways that Negro people in Starkville and throughout the state of Mississippi, and in other states I learned, were characterized and treated invidiously by more than a few White folks never made any sense to me, nor did I think all of this fair or right. So, during my final year of high school when making plans for attending college, I was determined not to attend a Negro college in the state of Mississippi, even though there were several Negro colleges that were attended by many from my hometown whom I knew, even from my class. I applied for admission and was admitted to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where I planned on studying to become an *educated* minister. (That's a story for another occasion.)

On entering Fisk (fall of 1963) and preparing for this education, I soon started taking classes in Philosophy offered by the Department of Religion and Philosophy. At the time, I thought that in those classes I was reading works by people who were working at making sense of how best to live by being reasonable while highlighting the importance of human rationality. I concluded "Oh, here are people making sense of making sense. I want to learn to do this, too." Learning how to make better sense of life and living would enable me, I thought, to be able to figure out how to make conditions fair and right for Negroes.

Fisk University was a premier institution serving Negro students historically and predominantly, with an interracial faculty a significant number of whom cared a great deal about the students, about our learning. It was a small, residential, liberal arts institution that was very demanding academically. Early on I realized that many of the faculty didn't seem to be doing their work of teaching and mentoring as a job but were engaged in their work as a way of life. A significant number of faculty members even lived on the campus and were engaged with students and campus life in all kinds of ways (as were many on the faculty who did not live on the campus). Fisk was thus *very* engaging intellectually and emotionally, socially, and culturally. It was a very special residential learning community. I decided "I want to live *this* kind of life!" and decided that I would become an academic. Actually, to become a college or university teacher, for at

the time I had no idea of becoming someone of the accomplishment and prestige of a *scholar*. Scholarship, it would turn out much later, did become important for me. However, at the onset of my journey toward a career, it was not my original, nor my principal, focus. *Teaching* was, and has remained, my principal focus: how might I help students think and reason well, critically, and learn to *make better sense* of things in order to live and enjoy life fairly, particularly regarding race-relations.

There were other very important influences on my decision. From late in the 1950s through the 1960s, Nashville was a major locus of organized efforts to secure constitutionally sanctioned *freedom* and *rights* for Negroes. Students at Fisk, Diane Nash and John Lewis among them, as well as faculty, administrators, and staff, were participants in and contributors to what became the Nashville Movement. Likewise, from other Negro institutions of higher education in the city. When I entered Fisk, that Movement was still very much under way. On a Sunday evening during my first year, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke on campus to an audience that all but filled the gymnasium. Of course, as was the experience for many in attendance, his message was inspiring and an appeal to involvement to which more than a few responded positively and either continued or began their involvements in the Movement, joining in demonstrations at business still insisting on racial segregation. These Movement participants were willingly submitting to being jailed for their disciplined and principled nonviolent involvements. Soon after King's moving speech that evening, I received a telephone call from my mother who, along with my father, having heard by radio of King's visit to the campus, *insisted*, in the strongest terms, that I *not* become actively involved in the Movement. My parents were fearful of what might happen to them and to their employment if their employers and/or other White folks in Starkville learned of my involvement in the Movement (at the time, my mother worked as a maid who prepared meals for and cleaned the homes of several White families in Starkville as my father continued his work at First Baptist). They were fearful, too, of what might happen to me. I was close in age to Emmett Till, who had been murdered in Mississippi, a killing that was yet another instance of the racialized, racist-motivated killings, the lynchings, that were intended to terrorize Negroes so that we would "stay in our place" in racially segregated society. The brutal murder of Till was also a pivotal event that helped to motivate the emergence of a Movement that was a new phase of struggles for justice that had been under way for centuries.

I had neither the courage nor the determination to defy my parents, nor the courage to join the Movement. Nonetheless, I was moved by the dedication, the courage, the determination of folks around me at Fisk, with the very strong support of officials of the university, to be engaged in an organized movement to make sense of a nonsensical program of legally sanctioned invidious, violent racial segregation, a movement to make things right, and fair. One day as I stood on the campus watching as a group from the university, singing freedom songs, left on still another march to challenge segregated businesses, I could not hold back the tears from my feelings of deep disappointment with myself for not joining them, for my lack of courage to defy my parents and to overcome my fear of participating in the Movement. In that moment, I made myself a solemn promise: though I would not join in the Movement as an active participant in the marches

and such, I would find a way to be a supportive contributor. Mindful of the many persons in the university who were supportive contributors (such as senior administrators, the president of the university among them, who routinely raised funds and went to court to secure the release of persons from the university who were arrested during demonstrations), I decided that I could, as a college or university teacher, do likewise. These decisions, this promise to myself, would become determining influences on my decision-making, on my choices of guiding principles and practices engaged in, over the course of my career, especially as I prepared to become and became a teacher and academic professional working in the discipline of Philosophy.

Interviewer 2 (I2): Who are your philosophical heroes? Who are your main influences?

LO: When I was an undergraduate, I didn't really have any main philosophical influences. I had no favorite philosophers, certainly none among the canonical philosophers I studied. For example, I *hated* reading Aristotle (too "dry" for my taste, at the time). I read Thomas Aquinas, but I did not like his thinking, his issues, his style. There were no figures in academic Philosophy whom I was led to study who were particularly influential on or preferred by me. I studied them as presented to me in courses, and I did what I needed to do to accumulate what was required in terms of demonstrated learning in order to move on to the next level: graduate school.

I was recruited to graduate study in Philosophy with a substantial fellowship as a member of the 1967 cohort entering the Ph.D. program at Boston College (Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts). During my years of study, several experiences were of lasting impact. First, at the invitation of a friend (still) in my cohort, I went with him to Boston University to hear a lecture, which, it turned out, was delivered in a large lecture hall that was filled to capacity with standing room only. I did not know of the lecturer, and there was nothing distinguishing about his appearance or demeanor that, on my first seeing and hearing him, made him stand out. However, he was intellectually engaging, even riveting. Fascinated, I wondered "Who the hell is this person?" After listening to and being moved by his lecture, and after leaving the lecture hall, I was convinced that "I've gotta read up on this man! Has he written stuff?" My friend told me about his book [One-Dimensional Man] that I immediately searched for in Boston area bookstores, found and purchased a copy, then began immersing myself in reading. Of course, the author, the lecturer, was none other than *Herbert Marcuse*!

Fortunately, I had taken a seminar on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's [Phenomenology of Mind] that was taught by Jacques Taminiaux, at the time a visiting professor in Philosophy at Boston College. His seminar was an important learning experience, a truly first-rate seminar in which I had learned, among other important gains, how to follow and appreciate the rhythm and logic of Hegelian dialectical thinking articulated in writing (subsequently translated into English). Consequently, reading Marcuse was not at all challenging. Rather, it was quite engaging intellectually and, thus, enjoyable, for I knew how to 'get in step and

dance' with the way in which Marcuse expressed his critical thinking in his writing. A bonus was that I discovered that Marcuse was a member of a close-knit *group* of thinkers with a shared agenda, among them Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, others including Jürgen Habermas. I started acquiring their writings in English translation and set about immersing myself in reading and thinking with them in order to make critical sense of emancipatory possibilities for freedom and justice for Black folks in the United States. These readings, several of these thinkers, became quite influential.

Other quite pertinent experiences came by way of my being in social networks and contexts that were conditioned substantially by phases and aspects of the powerful social, political, and cultural Black Power/Black Consciousness Movement, which was gathering force as I began my senior year at Fisk. Movement participants and proponents were active on the campus and were increasingly very influential, impacting me in ways that began to change my life in ways that I tried to resist early on, but could not escape. By the time I entered graduate school, I had begun to embrace some of the changes to self-understanding and identification called for by proponents of *Black consciousness*.

In my second year of graduate study, I had begun a relationship with a beautiful, self-assured Black woman, a graduate student in the Boston College School of Nursing, who was well into her journey into Black consciousness. (That woman is my wife of soon to be fifty-two years!) Together one evening we went to a well-publicized and much talked-about lecture on the Boston College campus. As was often the case at such events, a person was on hand selling books one of which had a title that was absolutely *riveting* in that it included a phrase that I had never seen before in a book title: [The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual] The author of the book, Harold Cruse, was the lecturer. As was my experience on hearing Marcuse's lecture, I was deeply impressed by Cruse's lecture and thirsted for more. I purchased the book before leaving the arena and began to read it when home.

The book was really transformative of my thinking with Cruse's analysis and critique of shortcomings of the thinking guiding the practical engagements of various generations of persons and traditions of *Negro* intellectuals. Would a decidedly *Black* intellectual be a corrective, more appropriate to the demanding needs on the agenda of the Black Power/Black Consciousness Movement? I had not remembered ever seeing those two terms—"Black" and "intellectual"—brought together to forge a concept of an intellectual grounded in a racial identity with explicit emancipatory social and political commitments. Such conceptual forgings were the principal focus of the Black Power-inspired cultural renaissance that was underway, with frequent and insistent calls—even demands— for *thinking Black*. Living in such a maelstrom can affect a person in ways some of which one is not even aware of initially. And in college and university contexts of intense intellectual ferment amplified by practical engagements—and the Boston-Cambridge (Massachusetts) metropolitan area was then, and continues to be, one of the most fertile and prominent such contexts in the United States—there were engaged Black and other people aplenty who were talking about previous and revived historical moments of Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist schools and

traditions of “*thinking Black*.” I was affected, and profoundly.

Yet, what did “*thinking Black*” mean? How to find or forge one’s way into such thinking? What was one to become, and do, while “*thinking Black*”? These questions cut deeply, psychologically as well as intellectually. When I was a kid, for example, if another kid called you “black” you were usually ready to fight them because “black” was a derogatory characterization. Throughout my last year at Fisk and for decades thereafter, I was experiencing a historical moment during which that negative notion was transformed into a positive one. This required a certain kind of inversion of thinking and valorization, of my self-identification first and foremost, that was initially very difficult and psychologically destabilizing. Such was the transformation I was undergoing, even participating in and contributing to through various activities in which I was engaged on the Boston College campus and through engagements in social and political networks beyond the university. Perhaps best said, across those years (1966 onward) I was a *Negro* in crisis endeavoring to become a *Black* intellectual.

Supposedly, there was to be something substantively and consequentially different to be had by understanding oneself as *Black* rather than *Negro*, and as conditioned, perhaps even determined (matters to be sorted out), by sharing in a heritage of traditions of significance that stretched across time and space to continental Africa and the civilizations of African peoples that preceded enslavements and colonizations of African peoples and lands by peoples from continental Europe who were supposedly a unified White *race* though distinguished by their organized living in different nation-states. In contending with these issues, I had immersed myself in a quite new sphere and agenda of thinking that was different from what I had been challenged to consider in any Philosophy class or seminar I had taken. In fact, in all of my classes and seminars in Philosophy, I was *never* assigned a text that was written by a Black person.

Of enormous influence on my formation during my years of late undergraduate and graduate studies, then, were the calls for *Black Power!*, *Black consciousness!*, thus for *Black thinking* on college and university campuses that gave rise to organized demands, backed by occupations and take-overs of buildings and administrative centers on many campuses, for more Black faculty and courses focusing on Black peoples; demands for organized, institutionally-supported academic programs of study intimately linked to communities of Black people beyond campuses whereby the knowledge forged in the studies was to be applied directly to addressing the various needs of Black folks in those communities. Here, then, was the agenda by which I could endeavor to keep my solemn promise I made to myself on that fateful day at Fisk: how I could, as a decidedly *Black* teaching knowledge-worker of *African descent* contribute to the missions of the Movements (Freedom/Civil Rights, Black Power) for freedom and justice for Black peoples.

A unique opportunity to contribute was presented to me when I was asked by senior administrative officials of Boston College to develop a Black Studies Program for the university. (I had, it seems, gained some degree of prominence as a contributing participant in efforts on the campus that were pursued by an organization of Black undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. (I met

the woman who became my wife during a meeting of the organization during her first year in the School of Nursing, my second year in the university.) In agreeing to their request, I had to devote even more serious effort to thinking about the development and organization of knowledges in a university, about how the resources of the various disciplines could be tapped to be of service to justice-seeking social transformations that would bring on emancipatory possibilities for Black folks. Again, *none* of these concerns, *none* of the ethical and epistemological issues such a venture brought to the fore, were foci of consideration in any Philosophy course I took during my graduate studies. In that regard, I was on my own.

But not alone. Already, learnings were coming from encounters with Herbert Marcuse and his crew, with writings by Harold Cruse, with other writings brought to my attention during intense debates that were part and parcel of my participation in networks of like-minded, similarly motivated students, lay persons, and engaged, often quite well organized, thoughtful persons in local communities and from across the country, across the world, even. For example, participation in some of these networks had informal required reading lists that included such works as [The Autobiography of Malcolm X; The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks by Franz Fanon; Eric Williams's Capitalism and Slavery; the groundbreaking anthology The New Negro], a publishing project organized and edited by Alain Locke. (Locke was the first Negro Rhodes Scholar from the United States and the first US American Negro to be awarded a Ph.D. in Philosophy by Harvard University. His career as a faculty member was spent at Howard University, years when he also produced a substantial body of path-setting critical writings on matters of aesthetics and Negro experiences, value theory, and race relations, among other subjects, while serving as a mentor to a number of young writers who were the drivers and carriers of a "*new Negro* renaissance" in arts and letters.) In December of 1968, still another instance of consequential serendipity: while browsing in a favorite bookstore in Harvard Square (Cambridge, Massachusetts) one evening, I noticed a journal I had never heard of before. It had a distinctively designed cover with bold, black type on a white background with the provocative title [The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research]. Yet another combination of terms that invoked conceptions of modes of being that went to the core of my evolving conception of who I might become, how I might pursue the fulfillment of my solemn promise to myself: "Negro" and "intellectual," "Black" and "scholar."

During this fertile period while in graduate school on another occasion of bookstore browsing, I stumbled upon Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's [The Social Construction of Reality] and writings by Alfred Schutz, first his [Phenomenology of the Social World]. I was already immersed in reading Frantz Fanon's [The Wretched of the Earth] and, especially, [Black Skin, White Mask], and W. E. B. Du Bois' [The Souls of Black Folk]. These were the seminal texts that I drew on to forge my dissertation project, [Language and the Transformation of Consciousness: Foundations for a Hermeneutic of Black Consciousness], as a way of entry into critical study of the "Black" remaking of the self-consciousness of many Negroes and of potent efforts to forge the arts and culture for/of Negroes-*cum*-Black folks. When I told the chair of the Philosophy department what I had in

mind for my dissertation, he just looked at me and declared, supportively, “You’re on your own...” I conferred with a professor, David Rasmussen, with whom I had developed a very helpful and healthy relationship (he served as my advisor for an independent study project I devised in order to immerse myself in studying works by Schutz, which were not taught in the graduate program) who agreed to serve as chair of my dissertation committee and, thereby, to direct my project. (Notably, Rasmussen did not have direct expertise in the novel area that my project was opening on to, consequently I was doing a lot of reading on my own and through independent study courses that he agreed to review and grade the writings I produced, which enabled me to earn formal credit for my studies. Yet, Rasmussen was respectful of my venturing into uncharted territory and was fully supportive of me doing so while *insisting*, and making sure, that I produce work of very high quality. We became, and have remained, close friends.) In working on the dissertation, I also discovered and drew on an important writing by George Herbert Mead, [Mind, Self, and Society], in which he explored development and identity formation in social contexts

“Philosophy of Race” V. “Philosophizing About Race”

II: Your influences are the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer and Adorno, and of course Marcuse, and Hegel. You talked about issues about race. Let’s go there. You have written quite extensively on the philosophy of race and ethnicity. This is an obvious question: Why did you specialize in this area in the first place?

LO: I don’t think you’ll find anywhere in my writings that I have ever used the expression “philosophy of race” to describe or characterize my thinking, my writings.

II: Yes, that is why there is a conjunction there.

LO: The expression “philosophy of race” was forged and gained currency rather recently to distinguish discourses pursued by academic philosophers engaged in critiques of long-unacknowledged, even denied, endorsements of invidious racial distinctions and categorizations, and racists pronouncements, by canonical philosophers. Still, the expression is not one that I use to characterize my own work, for example, by way of a disciplinary area of specialization or area of concentration. I find the expression too ambiguous, thus problematic. Can one have “a philosophy of race”? Perhaps one can, but I need help understanding just what such an expression would refer to. Meanwhile, I have *not* been interested in developing “a philosophy of race” per se. Certainly, I have been endeavoring to explore concepts and valorizations of *raciality*, and doing so “philosophically,” one might say, which, I suppose, is what many persons might mean when using the expression “philosophy of race.” Again, for me the expression is awkward, sometimes even off-putting. Consequently, I don’t use it. I don’t think about my efforts in a way intimidated by the expression, at least as I hear it.

Furthermore, I wasn't trying to specialize in considering matters of raciality. As I've indicated, I was endeavoring to work at addressing concerns that had emerged out of learned awareness of, and having to contend with, lived experiences of invidious racial segregation, conditions of life that didn't make sense to me, that I and significant others were convinced were unfair, not right. Well into my undergraduate years, and even more during my years of graduate study, I spent much of my time preparing to better understand what did not make sense to me. I wasn't trying to develop "a philosophy of race"; I was trying to understand the what and why of invidious racial segregation, of racism directed at and imposed on Negroes/Black folks, folks of African descent, and other folks subjected to White Racial Supremacy and to do so "philosophically," that is, with resources from the discipline of academic, professionalized Philosophy if and when I could find them, but, most importantly for me, with what I took to be a most important resource: *critical* thinking. Along the way an even more challenging problematic emerged, and in this case there was an abiding influence of W.E.B. Du Bois whereby in an 1897 essay presented to members of the American Negro Academy as the second of the Academy's Occasional Papers he endeavored to pose and made the case for "The Conservation of Races." The challenge Du Bois undertook was to argue an *affirmative* case for identifying and "conserving" racial groupings while acknowledging and combatting invidious valorizations of, and invidious practices imposed on, racialized groupings.

This challenging essay by Du Bois became and remains extraordinarily influential for me in many respects. It is, first and foremost, a question of how best to understand the human species, its emergence and evolution. If we accept provisionally some of the accounts of evolutionary thinkers, from anthropology and several other disciplines and sciences, *Homo sapiens* evolved and competed successfully with natural environments and with other species, hominids among them, in a large, diverse geographical expanse long called "Africa." The initial populations grew, dispersed, and resettled continuously, eventually settling in human-made conducive environments throughout most of planet Earth. Further, according to these accounts, throughout tens of thousands of years of this continuing adaptive (evolving) dispersing and resettling, differing populations emerged, though of the same species. Those differing populations, while surviving, created differing modes of life. Pursuing those modes of life in different environments, the differing populations evolved culturally and, even, bio-physically.

I take these accounts to be indisputable, in general. Human beings don't come into the world pre-programmed to survive, let alone to endure and flourish, but have had to *learn* how to do so, another critical factor in the success of evolutionary survival. And for cross-generational survival to persist, the learning must be preserved and passed on to successive generations. Moreover, *all* involved in adaptive survival is facilitated by species-specific *Homo sapiens* sociality, which is quite a rare form among all of the *social* species: namely, *eusociality*, that is, the formation of multi-generation social groupings through descent from common ancestors with social bonding—group solidarity—formed and sustained by *altruism*, by some in the group opting to sacrifice their advantages, even their well-being, for the good of the group. *Eusociality* became, and remains,

anthropologically necessary for *Homo sapiens'* evolutionary survival. However, *eusociality* was *not* a matter of “contract formation” by some group of mature, self-interested reasoning adult males who forged a mutually beneficial “social contract” in order to mitigate the destructive consequences of a supposed “war of nature.” Rather, *eusociality* emerged as an evolutionary force that became and remains decisive for *Homo sapiens'* survival and well-being, thus is a *conditional anthropological necessity*. Consider: If one were to leave a newborn human alone on an island and return six months or later to see how the newborn was faring, what would one find?

II: A dead baby!

LO: Right! There is *no* way that a newborn human can survive and develop into semi-independent adulthood without the assistance of other older, already well-developed, culturally learned, human beings who *care* for the newborn, emotionally as well as by providing the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. Furthermore, our species has the longest period of assisted development of newborns into semi-self-capable adults of any mammalian species. It takes a long time to foster, to nurture, human development to the point where a person can exercise anything approximating what we want to call “independence.” This fostered development takes more than a decade-and-a-half, and even then the development must be fortified continuously.

To my mind, too much of academic Philosophy has been grounded in and perpetrated by a philosophical anthropology that does not make human eusociality central. In his seminal essay “What is Enlightenment?”, for example, Immanuel Kant speaks about “maturation” and how at least some among a particular race of human beings have crossed a threshold of maturation into “Enlightenment.” However, one of the things that I find particularly striking about Kant’s assertions is that he provides no account of how those select human beings come to be “mature.” Again, no individual achieves maturation, or Enlightenment, on their own without supportive eusociality. It cannot be done!

How, then, should we account for human sociality from an evolutionary perspective and for a species that has dispersed all over planet Earth? How can we account for the evolutionary emergence, dispersals, and persistence of *Homo sapiens* over planet Earth *without* accounting for socially and culturally bonded populational diversities: different life-words of languages, cuisines, cultures, clothing, social formations, and within-group shared relatively differing phenotypes and genotypes? How can all the members of the human species on earth be cataloged with descriptive comprehensiveness without taking the diverse groupings into account, synchronically and diachronically?

Social Constructionism and Race

I2: Are categorizations constructed? Are they out there in the world?

LO: I am convinced that there's no such thing as "categorizations" that are "out there in the world." "Categories" are not natural "things" "out there in the world." Human beings, in order to survive and live by way of meaningful, pragmatically viable earth-bound life-worlds that require contending with *enormous* (though not infinite) diversities of *natural* kinds, *must* devise ordering strategies with which to make sense of and to contend with the natural kinds. The resources of languages, sign and symbol systems, are foundational for constructions of meaningful ordering systems pragmatically matched up to natural kinds via categorizations. We humans *have to* construct such categories with which to contend with natural kinds because we are not pre-programmed with pre-matched "categories," though we have evolved with pre-adaptations that spring-load particular forms of learning, particular forms of categorization (for example, for processing detection of different wavelengths of light into categorizations of "color").

What do humans have in the way of pre-programmed repertoires by which we can and will *definitely* survive and flourish? Nothing! We do have and/or develop various kinds of conditions of capability, but these have to be fortified through learning, socialization, and nourishment— learning a language, for example, a capability for which humans are "hard wired." We have a capacity for language development and use, but exploitation of the capacity depends on which social context and grouping(s) into which one is born and raised, what other linguistic community, if any, that one is exposed to, at an early age especially. No human being is born pre-programmed to speak any particular language, only with a capability for acquiring and using one or more languages. Still, the acquisition and utilization are not necessary, but contingent and socio-culturally conditioned, neuro-physiologically as well.

I1: This is Berger and Luckmann's idea of "social construction." That we are part of a society, we are thrown in a society, we can't escape society. In a way everything is socially constructed.

LO: As Aristotle proclaimed, only gods or beasts live outside political communities.

I1: Right, gods and beasts.

LO: Man is, by nature, a political animal, he asserted. I understand Aristotle to have understood and asserted that humans *by nature* are a *social* species of a particular kind distinct from all species of animals.

I1: Under the entry for *Race*, in the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy], your view has been classified as "thin constructivism." How do you distinguish that from "strong constructivism" or "thick constructivism" perhaps?

LO: I read that, but it was the first time that I encountered such a characterization of my considerations. You really need to question the person who invoked that characterization. I have no idea what they mean.

I2: You have been categorized.

I1: The picture is that there are extreme social constructivists saying that everything is socially-constructed (even natural categories). Your view has something to do with the middle of the spectrum of realists, as opposed to constructivists.

LO: I don't believe that one can be a "realist" and not a "constructivist." I am convinced that even categories used to give humanly meaningful orderings to natural kinds are "constructions." For example, let's review some important distinctions between Newtonian cosmology and Einsteinian cosmology.

I1: Distinctions that are prominent in history and philosophy of science.

LO: Right. There are helpful histories of sciences, of the natural sciences in particular, an important example being the classic [The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science] by E. A. Burtt. If we consider the cosmology of Isaac Newton and compare it to the cosmology of Albert Einstein, we will see that Newton has a particular conception of the cosmos that is influenced *significantly* by his conception of, his belief in, a perfect God that created the universe and imparted perfection to the universe thereby structuring the ordering of the universe in a fixed, mechanical, and lawful manner. (Quite similarly, when Aristotle endeavored to work out the cycles of the movements of the sun, the moon, the earth, and other bodies in the realm of the Gods, those movements, he reasoned, had to be circular since circles are perfect shapes, and the heavens, home of the perfect Gods, *must* involve movements that were perfect, thus were circular. However, in keeping with this conception, Aristotle's effort to sketch out the movements of the then-known heavenly bodies to account for the cycles of day and night and the phases of the moon required so many perfectly circular orbiting bodies that the scheme was unworkable!) Moreover, given Newton's beliefs that God was omnipotent, omnipresent, and *absolutely* so, for Newton, the universe God created had to be absolute, spatially and temporally.

Einstein's cosmology is quite, quite different, void of notions of absolute space and time. His is a conception of the universe as having emerged out of explosive conditions that imparted forces of motion still ramifying throughout the cosmos affecting, as well, the space-time continuum such that positionalities and much else are *relative* (to speed and mass...); so, too, the nature and interactions of the forces thought to constitute the dynamic structuring of a dynamic, still expanding universe. An Einsteinian theory of relativity is incompatible with a Newtonian cosmology of absolute space and time and requires a very different metaphysical orientation. To say the least, Einstein's contributions exemplify how constructions of differing testable theoretical models, different "paradigms," of the

orderings of natural systems can lead, have led, to profound changes to explanatory understandings of *natural realities* that are the foci of specific fields of scientific study.

Humans continue to invent testable (that is, “scientific”) ways of trying to make explanatory, predictive sense of the incompletely-known universe and planetary world that we inhabit. Within the context of various still-evolving sciences, we also try to test the inventions through strategies by which it is thought a construction can either be verified or falsified in epistemologically viable ways. Such efforts have become even more complicated now that there are credible considerations that even the production of verifiable and verified knowledge in the various sciences must be approached evolutionarily in terms of epistemological accounts. Regimes of knowledge production, verification, and justification—as appears to be the case for *all* forms of matter, all organized forms of organic life and what is produced by such forms—*must* be understood to be conditioned by the interacting dynamic forces conditioning *all* in the known universe, thus conditioning evolving humans and our productions of “knowledge.” Accordingly, then, proponents of evolutionary epistemology insist that the knowledge productions of human beings are conditioned by our evolution as a species, are conditioned by distinctive forms of *sociality* that do *not* elevate us to a “higher” kind of being above and beyond “nature.” Finitude, mortality, are limiting conditions of our existence, and “naturally” so. Contending with “realities” is thus an ongoing existential necessity conditioned by culturally-conditioned ongoing knowledge-productions that, in many instances, are constrained by how fitting, or not, the knowledge-productions are to the varying implacable of natural orderings. Always at issue are our “constructions” of what we mean by, what we take to be, “real.”

I1: Where does race come in? How do you connect these concepts to philosophizing about race?

LO: If we endeavor to construct a history of the human species, a widely shared prevailing consensus among those engaged in such endeavors have constructed “accounts,” on the basis of more or less evidence, regarding the emergence, dispersals, settlement formations, further dispersals, and ongoing evolution of our species. I am convinced that such accounts cannot avoid contending with the compelling knowledge of the consequential formations of populational groupings, long referred to as “varieties” or “races” (Charles Darwin used these terms interchangeably in his [The Origin of Species]), of differing subpopulations of *Homo sapiens* that, supposedly, outcompeted other hominid species and underwent a decisive, explosive evolutionary breakthrough into *eusociality*.

I2: Are you talking about diaspora?

LO: I’m talking about the dispersal of the human species throughout planet Earth. Again, the consensual claim of many who study this matter is that *Homo sapiens* emerged in Africa and spread over the rest of the planet. In that spread, people

settled in various places for long periods of time and evolved under certain culturally-influenced environmental conditions. Different collections of characteristics, phenotypical and genotypical, that are consequences of populational dispersals, settlings, and breeding under particular environmental and cultural conditions affected and effected human evolution, and the evolution of the planet, as well. The differing (more or less, depending...) interrelating populations have been characterized and distinguished—have characterized and distinguished their groupings—in various ways, employing various concept-invoking, value-laden terms, for various purposes, most often while attributing the differentiations to the deliberate workings of some Supreme Creator (sense-making of another kind).

Humans are not born pre-wired for getting on in the world successfully, yet we have to “make sense” of the world for getting on in the world. As I’ve said already, one of the most profound tools that humans have evolved for making sense of the world is language. And one of the tools of language is categorization, for example such designations as “good,” “bad,” “dog,” “cat,” “tree,” “house,” etc. Now, are houses given by nature? No. Houses are human inventions, constructions. Did animals come into the world wearing signs that specified “I’m a ‘dog!’” Or “I’m a ‘cat!’”? No! Where do those terms of categorization come from? They are human attributions. Now, of course there are “natural regularities” such that, for example, dogs produce other dogs and not birds. One of the ways that humans try to make sense out of replications of regularity is by developing and employing language-facilitated senses, ontological accounts, of why, to stay with our simple example, “dogs only give rise to dogs and not to cats.”

The fundamental point is that we humans *have to* make sense of the world, of the universe as best we can “know” it. It’s a dynamic, complicated universe, one regarding which we have to develop and continually test and revise strategies for trying to make sense of. Again, principal resources that are used to make ordered sense of that complexity are those of “scientifically” refined verbal and mathematical languages, including continuously tested logics of categorization and naming in the contexts of theories that *explain*. I take such efforts to be human contingent necessities. We *have to* try to make ordered sense of the ordered dynamic complexities of our earthly world and the “known” aspects of the universe. Conventions of naming and categorization are socially necessary contingent resources for ongoing human existence. We *have to* develop and use such resources if we are to continue to survive—though it is *not* necessary that we survive. Human survival is *always* contingent. That is why I refer to the development and use of such vital resources as *contingent necessities*: we *must, of necessity*, have and use these resources appropriately *if* we are to survive, but our survival is contingent, *not* necessary.

The rules and logics of naming conventions are resources that we humans develop to make sense of things in ongoing efforts to live successfully (survival across successive generations) on a planetary world that is dynamic, complex, and often dangerous. We *have to* devise means by which we can survive and manage and try to order our being in this planetary world in various ways and to varying extents. Such efforts have been undertaken in different ways (i.e., cultures) by relatively different populations. And for many centuries the many shared

phenotypic and cultural characteristics that, more or less, distinguished the individuals, thus, the varying populational groupings, were indexed to singular terms that referenced some prominent characteristics—language spoken or skin color, for example—and allowed for a pragmatic and economical way of distinguishing and referring to the groupings, the “varieties” of peoples. “Race” became a widely used and accepted term for the “varieties” and was subsequently indexed to the prominent feature of skin color.

It is often declared that “It’s wrong to treat persons and peoples in certain, especially invidious, ways simply on the basis of the color of their skin.” While there is merit to this position, what is often missed is that concepts of raciality—or racial difference—have never, *ever* been about references “simply” to skin color, a prominent visual feature among other visual features. Rather, the development and use of color-codes for populational groupings served a pragmatic purpose: to economize on making sense of a complex world by indexing what are thought to be characteristics shared by many in a relatively distinct population to a singular term that references a salient characteristic. Consequently, persons referred to by color-codes for skin tones are assumed to also have other characteristics in common with others in a relatively distinct cultural populational grouping. References to persons by color-code for the prominent feature of skin color are made on the taken-for-granted assumption that a host of other group-distinguishing, group-*defining* characteristics are associated with their skin color. So, when we refer to “Black people” and “White people,” we’re not talking “simply” about *skin!* We take it for granted that we’re speaking about persons with color-coded skin tones who, we assume, also share a long list of other characteristics, some of which are visible and some of which we take to be internal that we can’t even see such as temperament, personality, or moral character. Skin color-codes are linguistic indexes to what are taken to be some list of distinguishing characteristics of color-coded population groupings. My argument is that there’s no viable way to get on in an earthly world of diverse bio-cultural groupings of humans without engaging in some such economizing distinction-making, though we can certainly do so without the invidious loadings of the color-codes for “races” that have plagued our planetary existence for centuries.

And what do I mean by “pragmatic economizing distinction-making”? Let’s take a mundane example. One that I use with my students is to ask them to imagine that, while walking and talking with a friend, they are about to cross a busy street around the university. The friend is engaged in the conversation and doesn’t take time to look both ways for oncoming traffic before starting to cross the busy street. If the more attentive friend notices that a vehicle is approaching and they should wait until it passes before crossing the street, that attentive friend will say to the other “Wait, don’t cross yet! A car is coming.” I ask my students whether the inattentive friend is likely to respond “What are the make, model, and color of the car?”

II: That would be silly in that circumstance.

LO: That's right! No one thinks such will be the response. For purposes of maintaining well-being—not being injured, or killed, by the approaching vehicle—the inattentive friend has adequate information to act appropriately (not to cross the street just then) by having been informed “a car” is coming! Make, model, and color of the vehicle are irrelevant to taking a life-sustaining course of action. In this instance, “car” is an economizing distinction-making term while knowing the make, model, and color would be quite pertinent if one were shopping for a car. In the moment, when well-being—perhaps even life—could be at issue, the inattentive friend doesn't need to know whether the approaching vehicle is a Ford or a Chevrolet; whether it is a truck or a car; whether it is an affordable vehicle. None of that is pertinent to avoiding injury or death. That “A car is coming!” is all that is pertinent to know. All the other details regarding the vehicle such as its color, etc., are utterly irrelevant. The inattentive friend just needs to know that one of a kind of thing in the world of which there are many millions is in imminent proximity, possibly to his or her detriment. Pragmatic economizing distinction-making in a moment that is utterly critical for making sense of the world, that is, can make a difference between continued well-being or injury, even death.

Race and Evolution

II: How does this relate to our racial categories?

LO: Think about the whole of the human species. Aristotle and some contemporary thinkers believe that the evolutionary development of human beings as a eusocial species begins with the nuclear family, followed by the subsequent groupings of nuclear families into tribes, subsequent groupings of tribes into formations of villages, and subsequent formation of collections of villages into polities that have come to be called “states.” Such an evolutionary development is thought to be characteristic of our species. And because the human species spread over planet Earth settled and developed in different environments, there developed (evolved) degrees of group-shared (more or less) genetic and other diversities. Hence, the relatively different groupings of culture-producing, culture-perpetuating peoples of East Asian, South Asian, various African populations, populations in South America, populations across Europe, populations that came to be indigenous to the continents that, by way of imperialist ventures, came to be called “North America” and “South America.”

II: There's a diversity of human beings.

LO: That's right! And these relatively different culture-producing, culture-propagating, evolving populations are, to my mind, a *tremendous* asset of the human species. Why do I say that? Let's consider one important example: sickle cell anemia, a genetic anomaly. Correct?

II: Right, typical of people of African descent I think?

LO: A genetic anomaly carried by some people of African descent and some Ashkenazi Jewish people. Now, if a male and a female both carry the defective gene leading to sickle cell anemia marry and produce children, what are the prospects for those children? Not good. But consider: is it possible that sickle cell anemia can wipe out the entire human species?

II: No.

LO: Correct! Because the genetic anomaly is localized to certain populations, thus, is not carried by all persons in all populations. My point is that due to the evolutionary history of our species—that is, the emergence and evolution of relatively differing population groups of *Homo sapiens*—the genetic, cultural, and other differences consequent of evolution have given the species, as a whole, tremendous advantages long term: a genetic anomaly of the likes of sickle cell anemia is not a threat to the species *as a whole*.

Our specie-diversities are thus an evolutionary asset regarding survival and ongoing evolution. Consequently, any political project promoting “racial purity” by way of preserving the supposed genetic homogeneity of a particular racialized grouping is a *tremendously* bad idea. Allow proponents of racial purity—White Supremacist racial purists in particular—to come together and pursue their dream, hopefully on an island or otherwise isolated to themselves. Let’s check on them a hundred years later and see how things turned out for them.

Quite likely, not well at all. If racial purists get their way in terms of pursuing their own way of life as an isolated group (not in terms of being allowed to inflict harm on persons and groups different from them) they will breed themselves out of existence. Without new genetic information coming into the gene pool of tightly formed and sustained inbreeding population groups, detrimental recessive traits will increasingly become dominant. New genetic *and cultural* information coming into reproducing groupings is utterly crucial to the evolutionary well-being of the human species.

In my judgment, what is beneficial for the human species is perpetuation of *somewhat*—though not completely—closed groupings that also intermix. We need both—distinctive reproducing groupings with intermixing—in order to enhance and sustain the viability of the species over time. Think of somewhat differing populations settled in different environments on planet Earth. These populations will face similar and different challenges that have to be met and resolved. Peoples in Africa, for example, will not have to build homes out of ice. But there are people who know how to do just that. In turn, we wouldn’t expect Eskimos transported to Africa to immediately know how to build homes out of materials ready-to-hand in tropical environments. However, we could say to the transported Eskimos “We know of some local people you can call on, who know how to solve the problem of building housing in a tropical zone out of locally available and/or created materials.” As well, we can say to Africans transported to the Arctic region: “We know just the people to call on for assistance with building housing because they’ve already met that challenge and can teach you how to do likewise.” Considering our species as a whole, all these population groups I regard

as *experiments* in surviving, adapting, evolving. As the relatively differing peoples keep perfecting their experiments while sharing what they have gained, the whole species is made better off. If one takes the position that we need to get rid of, or downplay the significance of, all the grouping distinctions, to phase out the groupings in favor of a single homogeneous grouping of humans, such a course would set the conditions through which our species would more easily be wiped off the face of planet Earth.

II: You're making an evolutionary argument here. For our species to survive, we need diversity. We need diverse races, diverse ethnicities, because the experiences of these diverse people will give us more materials for our survival. Is that the main argument here?

LO: Indeed! When one reads carefully W.E.B. Du Bois's 1897 essay "The Conservation of Races," one can understand that he was arguing that we should conserve the races—understood as socio-historical collectivities of definitive shared experiences, not collectivities determined by shared biological characteristics—because each has something worthwhile to contribute to the storehouse of human civilization. Consider the many forms, genres, of music from around the world being shared with and taken up by racially, ethnically, culturally differing persons and peoples for enjoyment, replication, innovation. Consider the various cuisines of peoples around the world! There are academics, among others, who argue that races don't exist, who oppose the notion of *race*. However, I have never met an academic, anti-*race* academics included, who wants to live in any place where there's only one restaurant. What self-respecting academic doesn't want to live some place where they can enjoy fine cuisine from around the world? What self-respecting academic doesn't like to think of themselves as being *cosmopolitan*? One can't be a cosmopolite enjoying the diversity of the world's cultural productions if there are no differing peoples producing cultural diversities. We do not live in a *Star Trek* world with a Starship Enterprise on which one can walk up to the replicator and say "give me such and such" in terms of foodstuff and have the replicator produce it immediately. If one wants Chinese cuisine, there must be knowledgeable Chinese food preparers around. If one wants Indian food, there must have been innovative preparers of the cuisines of India. One cannot enjoy Greek food if there have been no Greek people inventing Greek food. If one wants to be a cosmopolite, one has to have for choosing for consumption and enjoyment all that makes for a rich cosmopolitan life! Show me a self-respecting anti-*race* academic who wants to live in a town where the only restaurant is a McDonald's outlet.

II: So, we're dealing with a social-ontology picture, a big picture of how human civilization would survive. We will survive if we have a diverse species, diverse classes of people.

LO: I didn't say "classes," so let's be careful with our terms. My focus is on self-reproducing bio-cultural populational groupings, "varieties," "races" and "ethnicities" (subgroupings within "races").

I1: “Population groups” might be a politically neutral term. But why is there oppression between races?

LO: For lots of reasons. When there are populational groups developing in relative isolation from others and then come into contact, one of the important matters that persons from the differing groups who have initial and ongoing contacts is how to deal with those unlike them: that is, how to deal with “strangers.” Within populational groups strategies are developed and socially shared by which to identify and engage with those who are to be identified and regarded positively as members of the group, and how those are to be identified and contended with who are not members of the group. There is nothing unusual about the sociology, the social necessity, of such practices.

I1: Binary opposition between “he’s a friend of mine” or “he’s not a friend of mine.”

I2: Or, perhaps, unfamiliarity?

LO: I don’t think that a notion of invidious “binary” distinctions is appropriate here. For example, the distinction-making involved in being taught to love and support members of one’s family doesn’t necessitate developing hatred for, nor a quest to destroy, those who are not members of one’s family. The binary distinction “member/not a member of my family” is not problematic *because* the distinction is binary. (Remember, too, that notions of *family* are elastic and can be stretched, or contracted, for inclusion and exclusion.)

So, what brings on conflict when persons of differing groupings make contact? Primarily, I believe, when there is competition for scarce resources thought vital to the well-being of groups’ members: when groups trying to secure what they take themselves to need to survive and reproduce encounter competition from others regarding whom it is believed they will acquire the vital resources to such a degree as to put the concerned group in jeopardy. What “resources”? Whatever key members of a group come to believe are crucial to some, or all, of their natal group. Such “resources” can be almost anything: material, cultural, even (perhaps *especially*) female members of a natal group since females are vital for a group’s biological and socio-cultural reproduction, hence for the cross-generational longevity of the group.

Consider the very long-running White Supremacist prohibition in the United States against Black men and White women having sex. Notice that for these White Supremacists there was no issue regarding the race of women with whom White males could have sex. And why not? Because by White Supremacist racial reasoning, the White female is the carrier of the purity of the White race. Consequently, White females must be protected from racially contaminating impurities by having sex with a racially inferior non-White male. It is of no consequence to the White race what a White man does with his penis. What does matter for preserving and propagating White racial “purity” is the raciality of a male whose penis enters the vagina, and whose semen enters the uterus and impregnates, a White female who embodies, literally and symbolically, the purity

of the White race. Such perverted White Supremacist racial reasoning is what generated rabid concerns for a great many White folks, for centuries, regarding racial “miscegenation” and was the motivational fuel for the paroxysms of the terroristic violence of lynching of Black males, in particular, along with cutting off their genitals, supposedly to protect, or to atone for alleged violation of, the sexual sanctity of some White female who was the avatar of the supposed purity, thus of the superiority, of the White race.

II: How does your positive metaphysics challenge this kind of racism?

LO: The conviction, first of all, that all *Homo sapiens* groupings are of the same species. Secondly, that the species, as a whole, by way of these groupings has enhanced prospects for persistence. Mutual sharing of the life-sustaining productions of the various bio-cultural populational diversities is not just conducive to species survival, but also to species enrichment. Think, again, of music. Clearly, one does not have to hear music from around the world in order to survive. However, if one has the good fortune to cultivate appreciations of various forms and traditions of music from around the world and doing so enhances one’s experience of being a human being on planet Earth, those experiential enhancements become quite important. Of course, in order to have such enhancing experiences it must be the case that various forms and traditions of music have been, are being, generated in various places around the world and circulate such that one can partake of them.

I say yet again, the bio-cultural diversity of our species is one of our greatest assets, enhancing the prospects for specie-survival: for example, by reducing the likelihood of genetic catastrophe by virtue of there being slightly different genetic and epigenetic profiles of the relatively different bio-cultural groupings. Again, not by being absolutely different, for the groupings are of the same species. But, the differences matter, significantly. Living with and through those differences appreciatively is *the* challenge and requires the cultivation and practice of respectful democratic pluralism. However, that’s a challenging subject for another occasion.

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