

Uncovering Racialized Perceptions: Obstacles and Antidotes

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Building upon and extending the work of Martha Nussbaum and Noël Carroll, who claim that art contributes to the ethical life in educative ways, Professor Paul Taylor shifts our attention to what Jane Roland Martin aptly terms “cultural miseducation.”¹ Instead of the benefits derived from what Martin calls cultural “assets,” Taylor focuses on the impact of “liabilities.” While Nussbaum and Carroll refer to ethically educative literary works, Taylor points to culturally miseducative media. With persuasive details, he shows us what, if we use Martin’s framework, amounts to a hidden curriculum that inculcates racist miseducation by promoting and perpetuating racist “templates.” He exposes the fault lines of the racist hidden curriculum that runs through certain popular contemporary films, and elucidates its unacknowledged miseducative powers.

Taylor makes this discouragingly pervasive, socially conditioned racism an object of critical study and radical critique, and he asks us to join his endeavor. In the lineage of philosophical traditions as ancient as Socrates and Plato, Taylor’s version of the injunction to “know thyself” is what he terms “self-excavation” — a deep persistent investigation that moves us “beyond the idea of clarifying concepts, and toward the prospect of clarifying the reacting, perceiving, and desiring self that endorses and acts on the [affective] commitments.”

Taylor says such clarification can be challenging because we, who might be “Nussbaum’s ethical perceivers,” are also “inhabitants of postcolonial societies” who carry “blockages” that are “ideological, disciplinary, or unconscious, and therefore resistant to excavation.” To further Paul Taylor’s project, I explore some of the potential blockages or obstacles that we are likely to encounter as we commence serious self-excavation. In this brief essay, I describe two such obstacles and propose antidotes for each.

OBSTACLE #1: THE JUDGE

The briefest foray into self-excavation can uncover disconcerting layers of well-entrenched and automatically triggered racism. In John Dewey’s words: “Even ‘the greatest philosopher’ exercises an animal-like preference” and “must fall back upon imagination — upon the embodiment of ideas in [an] emotionally charged sense.”² And I, as someone who, for decades, has been consciously committed to racial equality, find myself stunned by Taylor’s powerful question: “What does it mean that Denzel Washington and Forrest Whittaker both won awards, earning honors that had eluded black actors for many decades, by playing depraved sociopaths?” I react with surprise, embarrassment, and shame to my own “*lack of confusion* when confronted by a stereotype from central casting” (emphasis in original).

Indeed, as we recognize how fully enmeshed we are in these “affective commitments that, in racialized societies, frame our very modes of perception,” it

becomes tempting to judge ourselves (or one another), and to “feel bad” or guilty about our participation in this cultural “lucidity that comes too easily.” Yet, this human tendency to generate and fend off superego attacks, or to pursue some other form of preoccupation with our own “sorry” state, carries potential pitfalls. As Stanley Cavell writes: “It is for Emerson not so much that we are ashamed because we do not give ourselves the moral law — which is true enough — but that we do not give ourselves the moral law because we are already ashamed.”³

Once the judge enters, the quest for constructive self-knowledge gets mired in self-blaming, self-defending, attacking blameworthy others, or even descending into defeatism and depression. Whatever the judge’s guise or disguise, as it takes center stage, we give less attention to what is actually happening in the present. The judge siphons off our energy, and the curiosity to dig deeper diminishes.

Faced with our own ferocious, or at least persistent, internal judges, how do we proceed? What would allow us to continue uncovering the pervasive cultural manifestations of racism in which we participate, often without conscious recognition of the extent of our complicity in their perpetuation? I suggest we “Bracket the Judge.”

ANTIDOTE #1: BRACKET THE JUDGE

In a dialogue on our “collective insanity” and the word “sin,” Eckhart Tolle writes:

[Tolle:] If you don’t like the word “sin,” then call it unconsciousness or insanity. That may get you closer to the truth, the reality behind the word, than a long-misused word like “sin,” and leaves little room for guilt.

[Tolle’s interlocutor:] I don’t like those words either. They imply that there is something wrong with me. I am being judged.

[Tolle:] *Of course there is something wrong with you — and you are not being judged.* I don’t mean to offend you personally, but do you not belong to the human race that has killed over 100 million members of their own species in the twentieth century alone?... Perhaps you haven’t looked very deeply into the human condition. You don’t need to condemn. Just observe.⁴

Invoking Tolle’s conjunction, with its crucial distinction, I propose that we bracket the judge. Following general philosophical practice, bracketing entails neither rejection nor acceptance of the judge’s claims; it only entails disengagement — a simple setting aside for the time being.

To bracket the judge means we not only (a) acknowledge “there is something wrong”; but also (b) refrain from judging ourselves or one another. We simply end all engagement with our judges, save the necessary conscious recognition that judging has arisen, which is required to lock the brackets into place. For now, all judging agendas are tabled. Our most persistent judges may, nevertheless, hover nearby, eager to reenter the fray upon the slightest provocation. Thus, to bracket the judge cannot be a once-and-for-all antidote. Most of us must bracket the judge again and again.

Notice that this bracketing move in no way diminishes my evaluative acknowledgement that “there is something wrong” insofar as my own “egoic mind” is definitely a “part of the collective insanity.”⁵ Even as self-condemnation ceases,

continuing to observe what is wrong can lead us to take appropriate action, engaging in constructive reform. If we can sustain self-excitation, we will uncover new details among hitherto hidden strata of collective racist templates. Thus, we continue digging with open curiosity, with a vital interest in laying bare the phenomena, and in coming to see and know deeply conditioned patterns — patterns that support such forms of human insanity as racialized structures of perception that trigger devastating behaviors from those humans who remain unconscious. By employing the bracketing antidote, energy for excavation no longer gets siphoned off by the trials and tribulations of dealing with judgments.

OBSTACLE #2: DISEMBODIMENT

The work of self-excitation requires focused attention on what is arising “inside us” from moment to moment, which means, among other things, staying in touch with our bodies. Therefore, a second obstacle is disembodiment.

I strongly agree with Professor Taylor’s call for “a deeper project of clarification” where we “investigate our affective responses” and attend to what Dewey called “the embodiment of ideas in [an] emotionally charged sense.” Otherwise we are susceptible to disembodied responses, whether aesthetic, imaginative, literary, or philosophical.

Taylor cites the cinematic portrayal of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin as a “savage black tyrant” in *The Last King of Scotland* as a telling case in point.⁶ We easily accept this film’s reduction of an “individual, complex, *person* who did...terrible things” (emphasis in original) to someone resembling “a gorilla” because the “irrational black tyrant is...an image...readily available to us for immediate and affectively loaded perception.” Taylor writes:

Modern cultures...provide their participants with a variety of ready-made templates, like these, for understanding racialized bodies. These templates become...resources for the intuitive and heuristic cognitive processes that enable our judgments, beliefs, and prejudices to manifest themselves immediately, without recourse to...deliberation.

On a phenomenological level, such templates can lead to devastating behaviors even before one becomes conscious of what is happening. According to the neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor, “certain limbic system (emotional) programs...can be triggered automatically,” and during this process “the chemical released” by the brain immediately causes us to “have a physiological experience.”⁷ Once this occurs, it takes up to ninety seconds for the “program” to “surge through our body” before being “completely flushed out of the blood stream.” After ninety seconds, I can then “make the choice to either hook into my neurocircuitry or move back into the present moment, allowing that reaction to melt away as fleeting physiology.”⁸ But when we lack direct contact with our physical sensations, and are consequently unaware of the initial occurrence of those physiological experiences, we may never realize that this was only potentially “fleeting physiology.” Thus, one who is disembodied runs the risk of staying “hooked” by physiological automaticity and, as Paul Taylor puts it, of having these triggered templates “enable our judgments, beliefs, and prejudices to manifest themselves immediately, without recourse to...deliberation.”

ANTIDOTE #2: PUSH THE PAUSE BUTTON AND STAY IN THE GAP

To offset the dangers of disembodiment and to work with the body's automaticity, I suggest we learn to "push the pause button" and stay in the gap between (i) our body's power surges triggered by internal templates and (ii) the ensuing reactive behaviors.

In Paul Taylor's succinct account of this process, at least four separate components appear in quick sequence:

We learn quite literally to [1] see the world through the lenses of complex conceptual frameworks, and [2] to respond immediately with the appropriate affect...to see black and brown bodies as thugs, and [3] to react to their presence as occasions for [4] clutching belongings, or withholding jobs, or opening fire. (enumeration added)

Let us consider this sequence from the perspective of Jill Bolte Taylor's analysis.

As acquired templates, the first two components have the characteristics of automatic limbic system programs. The third component seems to be a potential transitional space — a point at which one could push the pause button. In fact, during the pause, one might even reflect back on the automatic story about "thugs" that showed up with the body's surge of affect. But it is on the cusp of the fourth component where the crucial pause, a full stop, is most needed before the body's internal reactive chemistry leads to external reactive behaviors such as "opening fire." Employing this behavioral break enables us to consciously choose to stay in the gap between experiencing momentary physiological sensations of an emotionally charged neurocircuitry and behaving in ways that are unethical, immoral, or perhaps at the very least untoward and regrettable.

In closing, let me say that we have explored only two of many possible obstacles. Another obstacle, for example, would be the epistemological angst that arises: the pain of realizing that we cannot trust our ingrained perceptual frameworks, and that *any* perception could be suspect, contaminated by cultural miseducation. As we noted with the judge, such angst can entail a kind of demoralization in the face of radical self-mistrust. This fact reminds me that, with all the obstacles I have discussed, or simply mentioned, perhaps the most important general antidote comes from our engaged connections with one another. This work of far-reaching self-examination may have a better chance of thriving within a community of persons that is jointly committed to ongoing, honest inquiry. Could we, together, find new ways to nurture and sustain one another through the rigors of the sort of radical inquiry that Professor Taylor advocates and demonstrates?

1. Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

2. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 33.

3. Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 155.

4. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1999), 91 (emphasis added).

5. *Ibid.*

6. *The Last King of Scotland*, DVD, directed by Kevin Macdonald, (2006; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007).

7. Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight* (New York: Viking, 2008), 146.

8. Ibid.