

A Womanist Measure for the Measurer: Philosophy Embodied in Black and Woman

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INTRODUCTION

I extend my deep appreciation, as a PES member and Black female academic, to Kal Alston for this address, which brings forward and puts in its place an assumption that has largely shaped philosophy and philosophy of education, in particular.¹ I consider it a privilege, in the best sense of the word, and an honor to offer a response. Thanks also to Audrey Thompson, Kevin Gary, and Cris Mayo who were generous pre-readers; they each receive much credit for the strengths of this response, and of course, none of the blame for its shortcomings.

Are Black women the proper subject of philosophy? As a child of the African Diaspora, I remember a time when the very question would have been incomprehensible to me. I may have even thought that the query was an attempt to suggest that philosophical pursuits were somehow beneath the dignity of a Jamaican woman of talent and ambition. From my childhood perch, at eleven years old, before I migrated to the United States, the only persons who could tell me where to tread were my mother, father, and perhaps my grandmother, and God, of course—that was, until my initiation into the American Way.

I will explore two possible forms of the question arising from

the Presidential Address and align myself with Alston as a co-conspirator, from the symbolic north and closer to freedom. A parallel task is engaging the measure, like Shakespeare, finding profound offense, and also drawing from M.C. Hammer's sage tweet where he underscored that philosophy should be questioned by its own standards, through measuring the measurer.² Alston queries what is to be our task when it is found wanting. In its quest to replace philosophy's racially compromised "view from nowhere" with a hypothesized divine gaze, womanism proposes a consequential counterweight.

THE "MEMBER OF HUMANITY" CLAPBACK

The first form inquires whether the Black woman is the proper subject of philosophy *qua* human being. With a nod to the clever pun in the question of "being a proper subject of philosophy," this version concerns being the participant in the tradition. Examples mentioned are the otherizing of Alston's dissertation as more akin to "jazz" than philosophical discourse; the quote of Yancy's awareness that, despite his intellectual affinity for Kant's philosophy, he was not expected to be a knowing purveyor; and in Denise James' self-designation of Black feminist philosopher, encountering "disbelief in the tenability of such a pursuit from the person to whom I offered it as a description of my work."

Measuring the measurer in this question of whether the Black woman is the proper subject of philosophy in the first sense holds philosophy to its own standard of being governed by reason, guided by evidence, and engaged in critique and self-criticism.³ Particularly in the Anglo-analytical tradition, Wilfrid Sellars' work, to which Harvey Siegel also appeals in *Education's*

Epistemology, describes the overarching project of philosophy itself as one of the weighing of human experience and beliefs within the logical space of reasons.⁴ Although Alston foregrounds the constraining aspects of this logic, I run to it. Perhaps because of the colonially constituted formation of my own mind, order was not embodied in whiteness but in the rhythms of reggae, the predictable patterns of mango season as one part of an entire systems of knowing, and, in imagining my future, seemingly unobstructed pathways to greatness.

John McDowell, in *Mind and World*, extended Sellars' framing of philosophy's defining project in expressing a normative universality about our natural state of unformed capacities for reason in the first nature.⁵ There is also an assumption that these qualities are inherent in individual humans, who are rational subjects that are suited to exercise agency from their animal impulses. The idea that the rational person is essentially autonomous is also the basis of the moral norm of human dignity in the Kantian philosophical corpus.⁶

Presupposing that Black women have a limiting capacity, *qua* human beings, is not warranted *a priori*—it cannot be deductively asserted for any individual Black woman without contradiction from liberal philosophy's standards. And yet experiences like Alston's and the other Black women philosophers reflect the persistent view, even at the elite levels of society and academia, that Black women in the field are properly anomalous. Doing so obscures that the pursuit of objectivity can be apace with colorblind logics of a white *habitus* and conflates Anglo/Western philosophy with the seat of all knowledge.

So, the “Member of Humanity” Clapback can cede the ground, authority of reasoning, and claims of universality to the dominant Western philosophical canon, or as Charles Mills poses “the grand ethical theories . . . in the development of Western moral and political thought” and as well the “epistemological prescribing norms of cognition” that underwrite them.⁷ Particularly problematic for education is that it leaves in place the Saul Bellow presumption that Zulus do not have their form of a Tolstoy.⁸ I recall only too well in the late twentieth century the debates about multicultural education being predicated on the assumptions of cultural relativism in which it appeared that African Americans were still culturally emerging out of the state of nature and therefore not worthy to challenge the Western canon.

This perception was surely in place at my alma mater, as I sat in the conference room once during my doctoral studies, and a well-known moral philosopher and a well-known philosopher of metaphysics debated whether Blacks could do philosophy because their “GRE scores consistently were lower than those of white students.” I was in the room, registering the shock of their fallacious reasoning and their racism, as a human, but invisible as a Black person.

Alston references this struggle of Black female scholars being on the road of perpetual cultural validation of Black life in their philosophical scholarship. For example, to address the seeming hegemony of Western moral philosophy, Alston’s address mentions Michelle Moody-Adams. In her widely cited book on ethics, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture and Philosophy*, Moody-Adams maintains that philosophical inquiry is only one kind of moral inquiry, while foregrounding the myriad of ways that

human beings can “interpret moral concepts, rules . . . and display moral sentiments.”⁹ Based on her body of work, Moody-Adams clearly believes that Black women can do fine in the space of reasons, but she unmistakably undertakes a balancing act to not cede the philosophical high ground of standards of reasonableness in argument.

PROCLAMATION OF THE BLACK FEMALE SUBJECT

A second form of question asks whether the Black woman is the proper subject of philosophy *qua Black woman*, which I believe is Alston’s most resonant inquiry. In characterizing the harm in her academic journey from child to scholar, this iteration draws on Dotson and Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence. Dotson writes, “One method of executing epistemic violence is to damage a given group’s ability to speak and be heard. Because of Spivak’s work and that of other philosophers, the reality that members of oppressed groups can be silenced by virtue of group membership is widely recognized.”¹⁰

Measuring the measurer here draws on philosophy and philosophy of education’s critical self-reflection regarding the subject in the space of reasons. Black philosophers across genders have voiced these internal critiques (for example W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Lucius Outlaw, Cornel West, and bell hooks). We have multiple hints in the philosophical literature. For example, we are gifted with the African Diasporic lens in Fanon’s (1925-1961) anti-colonialist rendering of Black phenomenology that struggles mightily to retain meaning in the face of Francophone oppressors and their efforts to the contrary and is therefore trapped in an imprisoning “dialectics of recognition,” as Lewis Gordon describes.¹¹ We also have bell hooks’

articulation of the dilemma; quoting Freire, she states, “We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects.” She goes on to write,

This statement compels reflection on how the dominated, the oppressed, the exploited makes us subjects. How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as the struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?¹²

Womanism takes up this notion of embodied philosophy.

Conceived through the lineage of Black women’s literature, womanist theology and ethics developed interdisciplinary methods that reclaimed Black women’s stories and experiences, in the words of seminarian Melanie Harris, “as sources for theological and ethical inquiry.”¹³ Rooted in a literary and symbolic representation of the Black woman’s experience in the United States, womanism discursively articulates a worldview predicated on the divine gaze, rather than the “view from nowhere.” It incorporates a phenomenology of radical self-love that counters the perpetual spectatorship of the ever-adjacent and systemic white gaze that is its practical instantiation. An epistemology akin to praxis draws on hundreds of years of oppression promoting intergenerational knowledge of survival. It is difficult to see how this extension does not follow from the notion of history making the mind, to incorporate Cynthia Dillard’s “endarkening” in the formation of the mind and a belief system.¹⁴

In addition to considering the ways that different cultures negotiate the space of reasons through alternate frames of reference, woman-

ism-as-schema makes it possible through intersubjective comparison to consider the kinds of distortions of the space that occur because of cultural conceptualizations in language, practices, and symbols. In John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, he argued against the right to own slaves while advancing its practices in the British colonies, not impugning his principles but surely gesturing to a kind of performative flaw that, given its scope and consequences, should always be mentioned in conjunction with his theory of labor and of rights.¹⁵ Overwhelmingly, Alston exploring this question suggests that not only sexism but also anti-Blackness is integrated in the formation of the Western mind, and that this enculturation presents the problem of making the hidden premises accessible to critical thinking heuristics. Although John Dewey correctly diagnosed the ills of the quest for certainty in dualisms and the two-tiered universe, he failed to recognize its more insidious forms in the context of his masculinity and whiteness until the later years of his long life.¹⁶

There are, in addition, other critical expositions from white males that underscore problems with Western philosophy's ontology of personhood, as its account of the subject, that speak to a discipline in crisis and, not coincidentally, bear on Black women's social identity. Michael Peters and James Marshall argue that the "Cartesian-Kantian tradition of the epistemological subject as the font of all knowledge and moral action," otherwise conceived as "the philosophy of consciousness or subject-centered reason," is exhausted—since the late Twentieth Century, I surmise.¹⁷

While I would argue that signs of its exhaustion date much earlier, David Bakhurst also wrestled with this decontextualized account of the

subject in *The Formation of Reason*, where he pursues the matter of the extent to which “history, society and culture” shape the formation of the individual consciousness. At stake for Bakhurst is how education can participate in such a process to engender the best acquisition of rational powers of this “socio-historical self.”¹⁸ Bakhurst tantalizingly raises the prospect of the sociohistorical construction being formative in acquiring the mind in the second nature, as Aristotle conceived; indeed, he agrees with McDowell that enculturation of all forms means an “indebtedness” to others.¹⁹ It seems to me, although he may not view his project in this way, that for Bakhurst, there is an account of the making of the self into a culturally situated rational being that makes it possible to consider the ways that Black women’s lived experiences in the United States offer this resource—to themselves first, and then to saving Western philosophy from itself, and maybe to our Black babies. Historically, Black women, whom society has stripped of these powers, inhabit a subjectivity by virtue of the dual subordination that provides a distinct ontology from which to exist within the space of reasons.

CONCLUSION: BALDWIN AND EDUCATION FOR ALL IN THE SPACE OF REASONS

Alston’s address calls for a recommitment to the power of education to pursue the possibilities of the second question and not merely the first. Baldwin presents this prospect in his account of the aims of education. He writes:

. . . the entire purpose of education in the first place . . . when a child is born, if I’m the child’s parent, it is . . . to civilize that child. Man is a social animal. He cannot exist without a society. . . . Now the

crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society. . . . The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is Black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.²⁰

In a way, Baldwin proclaims that, for Black children in particular, education should impart a sense of MC Hammer’s hyperbolic celebration of Black people’s uniqueness and originality, and that, just as important, white students have a stake through their contemplation of the divine gaze, white identity formation relative to being a subject in the space of reasons, and theorizing its awful cognitive distortions. Alston and Baldwin surely converge upon this mission at the end of Alston’s address.

That Baldwin echoes Bakhurst (or the converse) about the formation of the mind and intimates the exhaustion of Western/Anglo epistemological and moral critiques, from the perspective of Black and female philosophers, suggests directions for the task ahead in philosophy of education. Alston’s address, with the exhortation to exhibit courage and humility, offers an orientation to engage in this work of philosophy of education for all embodied subjects, including Black women.

~~1 Kal Alston, “Reflecting Philosophy of Education: Will I Ever Be an ‘Ap-~~

- appropriate Subject of Philosophy?” *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 1 (2021).
- 2 M.C. Hammer, Twitter post, February 22, 2021, 12:50 PM, <https://twitter.com/MCHammer>.
- 3 Harvey Siegel, *Education's Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity, and Critical Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 4 Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- 5 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 6 Siegel, *Education's Epistemology*, 5.
- 7 Charles Wright Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 17
- 8 Saul Bellow, “Papuan and Zulus,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1994.
- 9 Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 176.
- 10 Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 237.
- 11 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1968); Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 50.
- 12 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 15.
- 13 Melanie Harris, “Womanist Humanism: A Deeper Look,” *Cross Currents* 57, no. 3 (2007): 393.
- 14 Cynthia Dillard and Charlotte Bell, “Endarkened Feminism and Sacred Praxis: Troubling (Auto) Ethnography through Critical Engagements with African Indigenous Knowledges,” *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education* 379, no. 1 (2011): 337–349.

15 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

16 John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

17 Michael Peters and James Marshall, *Beyond the Philosophy of the Subject: An Epat Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Mark Tesar and Michael Peters (London: Routledge, 2015).

18 David Bakhurst, *The Formation of Reason* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 6.

19 Bakhurst, *Formation of Reason*, 155.

20 James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," *The Saturday Review*, December 21, 1963, 3, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53c9b9c0e4b0efb67d6bf4d3/t/5edd038b74da2f6b54a73414/1591542667288/James+Baldwin+-+A+Talk+To+Teachers.pdf>.