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# Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

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Bernie J. Canterñs, Editor

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## FROM THE EDITOR

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**Bernie Canterñs**  
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The spring 2010 issue of the Newsletter contains Grant Silva's essay "Towards a Latin American Political Philosophy of/for the United States: From Discovery of America to Immigrant Encounters," which was the 2009 winner of the APA Prize for the best essay in Latin American Thought. Silva's essay characterizes the essence of Latin American Philosophy as one that is intricately involved with social-political issues. From this perspective, he analyzes the political axioms that emerged from the initial meeting between the indigenous inhabitants of America and the European colonizers. He argues that two interpretations exist of this initial meeting, one that characterizes it as an encounter and the other as a discovery. These interpretations rely on presuppositions that lead to the development of two very different political theories: the politics of encounter and the politics of discovery. He argues that the paradigm of discovery leads to political theories that advance assimilative nationalism and the legacy of imperial hegemony. On the other hand, he argues that the paradigm of *encuentro* is a better umbrella for understanding and dealing with migratory and multicultural issues of the twenty-first century because it provides a framework that can usher political thought toward more equitable and just social-political policies.

Next, Falguni A. Sheth in "Is There an Ethics of Racial Political Solidarity?" examines the ethics of solidarity. Unlike the notions of solidarity espoused by Juliet Hooker, Linda Alcoff, and Tommie Shelby, which center more on inner group solidarity, Sheth defends the ethical obligation of inter-racial and inter-ethnic solidarity among and between minority groups, particularly when one of the groups is a victim of an injustice. Sheth explores the case of Muslims and Sikhs and argues that, in the face of political and legal ostracization of Muslim men and women in the U.S., Sikhs have an ethical obligation to stand in solidarity with Muslims and thus commit a moral wrong by remaining indifferent to such abuses. Sheth then extends this argument to all minority groups and concludes that "In the same way that Sikhs have an obligation to speak in defense of Muslims, so do other minority communities have an obligation to speak in defense of another minority culture." Sheth's argument is delivered within the contexts of the ethics of assimilation, an interesting issue in its own right, particularly cases of coercive assimilation used as a political strategy with the perceived objective to eliminate cultural diversity and strengthen national unity. Sheth provides an excellent description of assimilationist policies and argues that, while they are carried out under the guise of eradicating disruptions toward political unity, they are really more about "fear of the 'strange'."

This edition also includes two essays commenting on Jorge J. E. Gracia's new book *Images of Thought, Philosophical Interpretations of Carlo Estévez's Art*, and Gracia's response to each of the respective comments. In Part I of *Images of Thought* Gracia analyzes some of Carlos Estévez's paintings and provides a philosophical interpretation of them. In Part II, he defends the value of philosophical interpretations of art by constructing a theoretical foundation that supports their legitimacy. In "A Philosophical Hermeneutics of Visual Arts: On Gracia's *Images of Thought, Philosophical Interpretations of Carlo Estévez's Art*," Mariana Ortega raises three critical issues related to Gracia's work: (1) Whether Gracia's definition of an art object is too narrow and too broad? (2) Whether there are objective criteria to evaluate the success of philosophical interpretations of art? And (3) whether philosophical interpretations of art have any value? Gracia defends the adequacy his definition of an art object as an artifact "capable of producing an aesthetic experience." He divides interpretations of art into "meaning philosophical interpretations" and "relational philosophical interpretations." In relational philosophical interpretations the "interpreter is not trying to reveal the philosophy in the work of art, but merely relating it to philosophy." In meaning philosophical interpretations, however, the interpreter is trying to understand the philosophical content in the art. Gracia defends this distinction and the validity of his classification. Moreover, he argues that there are objective criteria that can be used to discern the success of philosophical interpretations of art. Finally, Gracia defends the view that philosophical interpretations have value, and that their value ought to be measured, not by the benefit they provide for art, but rather by the benefit they provide for human understanding.

In "What is Interpretation? Images and thoughts about Philosophy and Art," John M. Carvalho raises problems concerning the legitimacy and value of Gracia's philosophical interpretations of Estévez's art. Carvalho contends that Gracia's project assumes that the notion of philosophy is trans-historical and agreed upon by everyone. Moreover, he argues that Gracia's interpretations select only the parts of an art work that best fit his preconceived philosophical ideas and the particular philosophical issues that he desires to highlight, while ignoring other significant elements of the art work. Gracia responds by invoking the distinction between meaning philosophical interpretations and relational philosophical interpretations, which, according to Gracia, Carvalho fails to appreciate. Gracia argues that the essence of a relational philosophical interpretation of art is that it selects and focuses on certain elements of the art work, according to their relevance to the *relata*. This exchange among Ortega, Carvalho, and Gracia raises interesting philosophical issues about the relationship between art and philosophy, as well as issues in the philosophy of art.

This edition concludes with two book reviews of George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Clevis Headley, in "The Existential Turn

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in African American Philosophy: Disclosing the Existential Phenomenological Foundations of Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race,” describes Yancy’s project as making a major shift in African American philosophy toward an existential phenomenological approach. Headley highlights one of Yancy’s objectives as justifying the legitimacy of the issue of race on an existential basis. According to Headley, Yancy accomplishes this through a phenomenological analysis of the concrete lived experiences of Black persons, focusing on the body. The meaning of the Black self is, in part, a constructed historical reality, one in which the white gaze plays a significant role. Finally, David Clinton Wills provides a short review of Yancy’s *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*.

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Anglo-American philosophy, it has maintained a strong human and social interest, has been consistently affected by Scholastic and Catholic thought, and has significantly affected the social and political institutions in the region. Latin American philosophers tend to be active in the educational, political, and social lives of their countries and deeply concerned with their own cultural identity.<sup>2</sup>

Iván Márquez ventures so far as to suggest that the political tendency of Latin American thought might even be considered a principle.<sup>3</sup> He writes, “Latin America is a place where thought and action are often seen as going together. The line between thinkers and doers is not easily demarcated. The word and the deed, in many cases, go hand in hand. And many times, words are seen as deeds.” Márquez continues, “Many Latin Americans use the word praxis to identify this thinking for/about/in action, and in many cases, this kind of active thought or thoughtful act is further regarded as transformative or liberatory [sic].”<sup>4</sup> It is in this line of thought that I attempt to rethink the political axioms that emerge from but also support interpretations of the initial meetings between the indigenous inhabitants of America and the European colonizers.

I focus on two paradigmatic understandings of this event: for some “America” was discovered while for others it was encountered. Equally complex and debatable, these historical interpretations provide a means of differentiating the theoretical landscape of political thought in all of the Americas, i.e., “the politics of discovery” and “the politics of encounter (encuentro).” While most literature regarding the debate between “encounter” and “discovery” concerns the perspective(s) represented by each term (i.e., either European, “Latin American,” mestizo/a and indigenous), encounter and discovery characterize different responses to multiculturalism, different notions of the state, and (consequently) alternative conceptions of state-membership, i.e., citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, I suggest that the politics of encuentro are better for dealing with the migratory and multicultural nature of twenty-first-century societies—hence a Latin American political philosophy for the United States.

My understanding of discovery and encuentro correspond with what I take to be the two fundamental questions at the base of all political philosophy in America: the justification of the initial settler colonies in what became the United States and the justification of Iberian conquest in what became Latin America. The politics of encuentro acknowledge the fact that nation-states are sites where different people come together and interact, building heterogeneous bonds that transcend borders. The politics of discovery, as I will frame it here, assumes an enclosed, self-sufficient polity that privileges homogeneity through exclusionary practices such as cultural assimilation. My main contention is the following: If we can rethink the nature of the state in a way that recognizes its dependence upon such things as cultural diversity, third world labor, an immigrant workforce, and international commerce, perhaps this can inform us of alternative conceptions of state-membership and civil participation that are fluid, grounded in material need and connected to actual political communities.

The first section of this paper expands upon the paradigm of discovery. My goal is to link this paradigm to what Carole Pateman calls “the settler society.”<sup>6</sup> The second section presents the political possibilities that exist within the paradigm of encuentro. Latin American immigrants in the United States offer an alternative framework for how to think about the state (and thus citizenship) from their experience of living in foreign lands amongst others of different ways of life—hence a Latin American political philosophy of the United States. An implicit

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## **ARTICLES**

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### ***Towards a Latin American Political Philosophy of/for the United States: From the Discovery of America to Immigrant Encounters***

**Grant Silva**

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It could be said that the phrase “Latin American political philosophy” is a pleonasm at best, a tautology at worse. Much of what is considered “Latin American philosophy” consists of inquiries related to politics, social organization, cultural authenticity, and economic independence or development, not to mention the fact that many Latin American philosophers have held some type of political office or civil service position throughout their lives.<sup>1</sup> Jorge J. E. Gracia refers to the political orientation of Latin American philosophy in his entry in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*:

It is difficult to characterize Latin American Philosophy in a way applicable to all of its 500-year history. The most one can say is that, in contrast with European and

goal of this paper is to place Latin American philosophy into conversation with Anglo-American social and political thought. In this light, I suggest that political liberalism (the dominant political philosophy of Anglo-America) has maintained domestic or “nationalistic” tendencies that resemble settler-oriented commitments. Getting past these limitations is perhaps the next hurdle for political liberalism and those concerned with social justice in its broadest sense.

### **I. United States Settlerism and the Discovery of America**

“Discovery” is the dominant interpretation of the events of 1492 in the Anglo-American world. In a place like the United States, where the national character of the country is said to be historically Anglo-Protestant, the discovery of America signifies a barren land, empty of real human inhabitants. The most apparent manifestation of this line of thought is the appropriation of the term “American” to describe the citizens of the United States—as if the only Americans that exist live within the boundaries of the United States.<sup>7</sup> Founded upon the idea of empty land, or what Pateman calls *terra nullius*, the politics of discovery lends itself to a nationalism that requires cultural assimilation or amalgamation—the idea that all immigrants should conform to Anglo-American tradition and culture if they want to live in the United States and be “American.”

The link between the paradigm of discovery and assimilative expectations is the settler society, a self-sustaining enclosed community of transplanted individuals (Europeans) living in a recently colonized or “new” region. In *Contract and Domination* (coauthored with Charles Mills), Pateman argues that the question of legitimacy is unavoidable for the settler societies of Great Britain, e.g., the United States and Australia.<sup>8</sup> Historical justifications, which draw heavily from John Locke, among others, bypass any debate about whether the initial colonies of Great Britain were predicated on conquest or colonialism, the former being the outright declaration of war against natives while the latter is the establishment of a settlement. For Pateman, the idea of *terra nullius* in addition to the rights of husbandry help justify British colonial enterprises by referring to unused land and the absence of formal government (European forms of sovereignty) amongst native people.<sup>9</sup> In this manner “conquest” is said to be a nonissue at the beginning of the United States (although one can argue that after *Manifest Destiny*, the appropriation of Mexican land, and other American imperial projects conquest is now a central concern).<sup>10</sup>

Settlerism connected to *terra nullius* serves two purposes: First, it explains how and why countries like the United States can lay claim to the land that they exist on. In an area lacking sovereign inhabitants or where indigenous people fail to recognize the full potential of the land they live on, early colonial thinkers saw the potential for justifying appropriation. By positing *terra nullius*, apologists of European imperialism created a clean slate (using the language of “state of nature”) from where social compacts could be created. As Pateman argues, the supposed social contracts that pervade modern conceptions of government legitimize sovereign authority using a rhetoric of emptiness that simultaneously provides land rights and hegemonic power, since according to modern standards no state could be formed in an area with competing sovereigns.<sup>11</sup> As the idea of sovereignty transitions from that of a monarch to that of a people, the second purpose of *terra nullius* comes into play.

The settler question provides a means through which ethnic and racial homogeneity is first situated in the colony and then maintained in the nation. This sentiment is expressed well by John Jay in *Federalist Paper No. 2*

With equal pleasure I have as often taken notice that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war; have nobly established general liberty and independence.<sup>12</sup>

Eduardo H. Galeano makes a similar point when he writes,

The Mayflower pilgrims did not cross the sea to obtain legendary treasures; they came mainly to establish themselves with their families and to reproduce in the New World the system of life and work they had practiced in Europe. They were not soldiers of fortune but pioneers; they came not to conquer but to colonize, and their colonies were settlements.<sup>13</sup>

Historically, the settler societies of New England did not live amongst natives and form mixed communities like the Iberian Conquistadors did in what became Latin America.<sup>14</sup> Inherent to the sovereignty claims expressed by settler communities seeking national independence was the idea that they do so as an organized and distinguished polity. Familial relations, ethnicity, or religion tended to be that which differentiated settler societies from native peoples or other groups. However, when such things as kinship serve as the basis of political communities, the types of national identities that result exhibit a logic of exclusion and understandings of racial purity that culminate in hypodescent theories of race or neo-nativist sentiments which argue for a unifying culture.<sup>15</sup>

By maintaining exclusive communities of ethnically or culturally European people—in terms of legal citizenship this was obvious with Chinese Exclusion, the denial of Women’s rights, Jim Crow law, anti-Irish and Italian immigration, and more recently against undocumented peoples—one can view the United States as a full partner in colonial projects of the North Atlantic (which is a point that demonstrates the difference between “post-colonial” and “de-colonial”). Today, the fight to maintain the uniformity of United States national identity, amidst the growing minority-majority population, is an attempt to maintain the legacy of imperial hegemony.<sup>16</sup> Thus, nationalisms that incorporate assimilative ideals require that immigrants integrate into the dominant social group when seeking admission into the body politic of a country such as the United States—assuming that full admission is possible in the first place. Arguments in favor of assimilation arise from the concern that multiculturalism and the existence of immigrant or minority cultural enclaves may result in the division or balkanization of the country.<sup>17</sup> Here, the price for official membership is an individual’s cultural existence. With assimilative nationalisms, cultural influence is one directional: immigrants must conform and not the dominant national group. The paradigm of discovery, in this sense, establishes a framework from where one can justify the exclusive right to land and the subsequent right to determine the meaning of “American.” In this setting, immigrants and the subsequent children of immigrant peoples forever maintain an outsider positioning that preempts the possibility of being a part of the United States (unless one is willing to buy into the politics of discovery). Here, the United States nation is a static ideal based on a fiction of solitude and uniformity.

## II. The Politics of Encounter: Towards a Latino/a Political Philosophy

Thinking about the political existence of Latino/as and Latin American immigrants in the United States is predicated on different axioms than the legacy of much Anglo-American political thought. Political issues regarding Latino/as do not presuppose land to be open and ripe for the taking. Through the lens of migration, Latin American immigrants arrive into populated or occupied territories. For migrants, the political question is one where dealing with differences and being “extra-national” cannot be ignored. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramon Grosfogel, and Jose Saldivar write, “Migrants do not arrive to an empty or neutral space.”<sup>18</sup> Histories of colonialism and hierarchies of power pollute the political spaces where immigrants seek to go. Thus, for Latin American immigrants, and by association Latino/as who are already in the United States, a different political question needs asking.<sup>19</sup> Rather than assuming a political philosophy that begins with the idea of emptiness, from where abstract principles of ownership can be formulated (i.e., settler contract), Latino/as start from trans-national predicaments grounded in the politics of *encuentro*.<sup>20</sup>

For many, the only significance of “encounter” is the fact that people were in the Americas before Europeans arrived. A “discovery” took place only from a Eurocentric perspective.<sup>21</sup> I interpret *encuentro* only as the “con-frontation” of different people, the historical fact of a coming together.<sup>22</sup> My interests are in the political significance of what happens when “peoples meet,” to borrow a line from Alain Locke.<sup>23</sup> Often times these meetings end violently. When this occurs war and eventually conquest begin. War develops when the appropriation and control of land/resources are in the background—this tends to be the case when indigenous politicians win a majority of votes in Latin American countries or when it appears as though Mexicans are taking over southwestern United States.

In this light, the paradigm of encounter has been viewed with much suspicion. Enrique Dussel issues a warning and implicit criticism in the following: “If the meeting (*encuentro*) of two worlds were to signify the new hybrid, syncretistic culture that the mestizo race is articulating, its content would be acceptable. Popular culture in its own creative consciousness would then be producing this meeting, and not the brutal event of conquest.”<sup>24</sup> The concern is that “encounter” refers to a clash that ended in conquest. I take Dussel’s concerns further: I am weary of the traps of “mestizaje” and other unifying narratives in Latin America (encounter being one). Often times, as José Vasconcelos’s *Raza Cósmica* can attest to, mestizo or mixed-race identities are used in nation-building projects. These nationalisms glorify the dead Indian but ignore the one in front of them.<sup>25</sup> When heroes of mestizaje such as Vasconcelos employ the idea of a coming racial synthesis (it is always off in the distance, which permits the status-quo to remain) they note the whitening or Eurocentric demand and expectation for indigenous conformity.<sup>26</sup> Mario Saenz, amongst others, calls this a “bourgeois mestizaje” compared to a “mestizaje from below.”<sup>27</sup>

However, extending the idea of encounter, I argue that it is a better framework for dealing with questions of multiculturalism and perhaps even national-citizenship than is discovery. *Encuentro* lends itself to a political philosophy that responds to people whose existence in the United States is predicated upon internationality, i.e., people who, regardless of their citizenship status, have historically represented a “non-American” identity. In addition, encounters do not have to end in violence. This framework highlights the shared ethical responsibilities that people have for maintaining their places of residence or

dwelling. Countries like the United States must recognize that maintaining one’s place of dwelling requires the social and economic contributions provided by alienated portions of society, those “on the outside of nationality.”<sup>28</sup>

In his attempt to formulate a definition of justice, Socrates makes a similar claim about the interdependence of nation-states (for him the “polis”) in *The Republic*: “It’s almost impossible to establish a city [polis] in a place where nothing has to be imported. [...] So we’ll need yet further people to import from other cities whatever is needed. [...] Therefore, our citizens must not only produce enough for themselves at home, but also goods of the right quality and quantity to satisfy the requirements of others.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough, by assuming bordered, self-enclosed polities, the basic assumptions of Anglo-American political philosophy are counter to that of *encuentro*. This renders such issues as undocumented immigration or justice for immigrants an international question separate from basic conceptions of society or justice. Take John Rawls, for example, the most influential political philosopher of the twentieth century. *A Theory of Justice* confines the basic elements of justice to a “closed system,” a self-sufficient society assumed to be isolated from others.<sup>30</sup> The theory of the state that arises from this perspective can be understood as the inheritor of modern colonial forms of social arrangement, namely, the settler society. While it can be argued that Rawls’s project is meant to supply a simple theory of justice that can be used to later resolve more complex questions, there are some obvious problems with a basic conception of justice that alienates upwards of twelve million undocumented people. When justice is construed in ways that allow only “official” members of a country to benefit, we confine the scope, range, and meaning of justice.

In the twenty-first century, it is no longer possible to understand social justice in its most basic form within closed (or bordered) frameworks. Migration, trans-national corporations, and multinational people challenge the possibility of formulating theories of justice that ignore the international elements of twenty-first-century societies. Likewise, given the legacies of social oppression visible within gender or racial differences, questions of reparations, affirmative actions policies, and other redistributive procedures necessitate a trans-historical approach to justice.<sup>31</sup> As Maldonado-Torres, et al., write, “The old way of thinking about migration is obsolete today given the compression of space and time.”<sup>32</sup> One cannot think of space as enclosed or isolated nor can time be viewed outside of the causal relationships that generate each particular moment. In considering the nature of justice, these new ideas of time and space must be acknowledged.

While I do not expect the paradigm of encounter to create immediate immigration reform, I do think it will put political thinkers on the path towards alternative bases for state-membership. The need to rethink citizenship is upon political philosophers in the twenty-first century. Even though climate change, depleting natural resources, war, and economic hardships are expected to increase human movement across the globe, state sovereignty does not appear to be going away. Thus, conceptions of state-membership (in both the legal and national sense) that can accommodate the existence of borders and yet make them less relevant in our everyday life are needed.<sup>33</sup> Rather than starting as pure national, Latino/as begin from inter-national predicaments, with foreign nationality, race, ethnicity, and even culture serving as the signifiers of this status. With a notion of state-membership that begins “inter-subjectively,” the model for social interaction is not assimilation but *asimilao*, an idea that fosters reciprocal cultural exchanges between immigrants and other “extra-national” individuals.<sup>34</sup>

This is perhaps a better model for the state in the age of human migration. Human interests are better served by taking encounters for what they are, meetings, and trying to foster a sense of dialogue and mutual respect that does not alienate significant portions of society nor ignore the legal demands of civil participants who lack proper identification.

#### Endnotes

1. For an extensive list (over 200) of Latin American philosophers in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States, with short biographical notes, see *El pensamiento filosófico latinoamericano, del Caribe y "latino" [1300-2000]*: Historia, Comientes, Temas, Filósofos, Eds. Enrique Dussel, Eduardo Méndieta, Carmen Bohórquez (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno, 2009), pp. 701-993. In general, the political nature of Latin American philosophy can be characterized in three ways: nation-building (here I include colonial and "post-colonial" thought), nation-fixing (developmentalism, dependency theory, positivism), and nation-transcending (decolonial thought, transmodernity, recent indigenous politics, pan-Latin Americanisms, Hispanic philosophy in the United States). I lay out an argument for these divisions, and its philosophical ramifications, in the forthcoming *The Political Nature of Latin American Philosophy: Nation-Building Nation-Fixing Nation-Transcending* (unpublished manuscript).
2. Jorge J. E. Gracia. "Latin American Philosophy." In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge, 1995), 418.
3. Iván Márquez. "Preface." In *Contemporary Latin American Social and Political Thought*, edited by Iván Márquez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), xi.
4. Iván Márquez, p. xi. It can be argued that any philosophical perspective that takes colonialism and subjugation as its starting points will maintain a fundamental political orientation. In this sense, the impetus for political action has always been a part of philosophy in Latin America. However, individuals such as Risieri Frondizi suggest that all Latin American philosophy wades in the wake of practice after Latin American positivism. Thus, what set Latin American thought onto its path towards praxis and the political remains controversial. See Risieri Frondizi, "Is There an Ibero-American Philosophy?" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9 (March 1949): 349 & 355.
5. For more on the different perspectives represented by the paradigms I offer see Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Mass: Blackwell, 2005). Along these lines, the idea of "invention" is sometimes an alternative to discovery and encounter; see Edmundo O'Gorman, *La Invención de America* (Mexico: FCE, 1961). However, I see invention as one understanding of the nature of America connected to the paradigm of discovery. As Dussel and others have argued, it's after America is covered-over that it is then "dis-covered." The process of discovery thus refers to human ingenuity as it relates to the inventing of a continent.
6. Carole Pateman and Charles Mills. *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 35-78.
7. Here I am using "citizen" in a way that corresponds to "nationality," "nation," or "peoples," i.e., as in being an "American national." I do not necessarily mean legal-citizenship. Nonetheless, national-citizenship does influence opinion over legal citizenship, in the sense that only those who enforce or ensure the legacy of the American people should be entitled to the rights and privileges that come with legal status. This tends to be what political philosophers mean when they refer to multicultural citizenship. For more on the link between legal-citizenship and national-citizenship, in addition to migration numbers, see Will Kymlicka, "Immigration, Citizenship, Multiculturalism: Exploring the Links," *The Political Quarterly* Publishing Company (Malder: Blackwell, 2003).
8. Pateman and Mills, p. 37.
9. Pateman and Mills, p. 46.
10. For more on the difference between conquest and colonialism see Pateman and Mills, p. 44. Pateman intentionally ignores Manifest Destiny, the invasion of Mexico, and incorporation of Hawaii since these are outside her scope (p. 38 n. 6). Part of my argument in this paper is that with the rise of Latino/as in the United States, the paradigm of discovery is becoming less pertinent to the story of America. Instead, the paradigm of *encuentro* (which connects to conquest) is better for dealing with the history of the United States and the reality of United States society.
11. For the explicit use of "state of nature," see Pateman and Mill, pp. 46-52. For more on autonomy and modern political theory, see Pateman and Mill, p. 39.
12. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003), 9.
13. Eduardo H. Galeano. "Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent." *Contemporary Latin American Social and Political Thought: An Anthology*, edited by Iván Márquez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 177.
14. An obvious example is the *encomienda* system used in Latin America. *Encomiendas* were segments of land where an Iberian master was given control of a large tract of land populated by indigenous people. Native nobility, or *Caciques*, were often given leadership roles in between the natives and Iberian masters.
15. It is possible to argue that the differing colonial projects of Anglo-America and Iberian-America created two different understandings of race. Given the current intermixing and exchange of people due to migration and globalization, one can even hold that there is a growing "Hispanization" of race in the United States. See Eduardo Méndieta, "The Making of New Peoples," *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race and Rights*, edited by Jorge J. E. Gracia and Pablo De Grieff (New York: Routledge, 2008). Méndieta writes, "In the Americas... racial formations have coalesced around two axes: in the United States around the axis of domination and exclusion, in Latin America around the axis of hegemony and inclusion. Latin American racial formations are defined by *mestizaje*, multiracial group inclusion and color differentiation. Racial hegemony is maintained through co-optive incorporation and reinterpretation. U.S. racial formations are defined by hypodescent, strict phenotypic differentiation that polarizes into biracial categories. Racial domination is maintained through exclusion, marginalization and repression" (pp. 56).
16. Nelson Maldonado-Torres has expressed this point in much more detail. See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Decolonization and the New Identitarian Logics after September 11: Eurocentrism and Americanism against the New Barbarian Threats," in *Radical Philosophy Review* (Vol. 8, 2005).
17. See Francis Fukuyama, "Identity, Immigration and Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 17 (April 2006); Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W.W. & Norton & Company Inc., 1991); Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2004).
18. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramon Grosfogel, Jose Saldívar. *Latin@s in the World System: Decolonization Struggles in the 21st Century U.S. Empire* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 8.
19. For Hispanics, an imagined foreign status is based on skin color; language traits (like an accent or bilingualism), cultural habits, or ethnicity. Étienne Balibar credits this imagined foreign status to the creation of "hyper-borders," i.e., walled, militarized divides between two countries. Hyper borders create distinctions between friend (insider) and enemy (outsider). The increased militarization of the border blurs the line between enemy and stranger. In a nation-state threatened by undocumented immigrants ("enemies"), strangers who

look like enemies exhibit dangerous qualities. See Étienne Balibar, "Strangers as Enemies. Further Reflections on the Aporias of Transnational Citizenship," Presentation Delivered at McMaster University, March 2003 as of 4-5-2009 available at: [http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/servlet/Xml2pdf?fn= RA\\_Balibar\\_Strangers](http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/servlet/Xml2pdf?fn= RA_Balibar_Strangers).

20. My idea of "transnationalism" is indebted to Dussel's notion of transmodernity. I emphasize the prefix 'trans' in order to express the fact that Hispanic identity ventures beyond the confines of a single nation or "peoples"; they transverse the boundaries of a single national group. Thus, by "transnational" I imply that Latino/as in the United States are extra-national or nationally ambiguous, their national affiliations either include more than one nation (such as "American" and "Mexican") or they simply lack any national affiliation at all. Octavio Paz captured the last with his idea of the Pachuco, a person of Latin American descent who neither identifies with the United States nor Mexico. See Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985). Transnationalism also connects to the fact that this is a social positioning that begins from migrant peoples, i.e., people on the move, in transit. Thus, there is an international aspect found in "transnational" missing in scholarly uses of "multinationalism," where a nation-state is said to contain more than one peoples or nations based on a constitutional federalist framework. In particular I have in mind James Tully's use of "multinationalism." See *Multinational Democracies*, edited by Alain-G. Gagnon and James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2-4.
21. For Enrique Dussel the term "discovery" not only begins from a European perspective but also requires at least two different moments of European understanding. The first covers over America by mistaking it for Asia; the second dis-covers the mistaken identity but posits a historicized identity altogether. Similarly, the idea of "encounter" (encuentro) has a long and controversial history of debate in Latin America, especially Mexico. See Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995), chapter 4, especially note 24.
22. Notice how the Spanish frontera (border) and the English frontier share the Latin frons as their root. The original meaning of frons refers to the "front brow" on a human face. Broken down further, this word also refers to that foremost part of an object, that which would come into contact with other things (the boundaries of a nation). Hence the idea of exchange or encounter between borders is derivative of this root. Add the prefix con to this, or "with," and one has "confrontation," not in a negative sense but one inclined towards meetings.
23. Alain Locke. *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, edited by Jeffrey C. Stewart (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992).
24. Dussel, p. 57.
25. This is a lesson the United States must learn when it is said that the presidency of Barack Obama points towards a "post-racial America." For more on Latin American nation-building see Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey (Eds. & Trans.), *Nineteenth-Century Nation Building and the Latin American Intellectual Tradition: A Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007).
26. See José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cósmica: A Bilingual Edition, La Raza Cósmica* (Maryland: John Hopkins Press, 1979). Vasconcelos writes, "The lower types of species will be absorbed by the superior type. In this manner, for example, the Black could be redeemed, and step by step, by voluntary extinction, the uglier stocks will give way to the more handsome. Inferior races, upon being educated, would become less prolific, and the better species would go on ascending a scale of ethnic improvement, whose maximum type is not precisely White, but that new race to which the White himself will have to aspire with the object of conquering that synthesis" (p. 32).
27. Mario Saenz, presentation, American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting (Pasadena CA, March 2008). See Charles Hale, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism: The Remaking of Cultural Rights and Racial Dominance in Central America," *PoLAR* 28 (2005), for more on the idea of mestizaje from below.
28. I use the phrase "the outside of nationality" in a similar way to how philosophers of liberation have referred to "the underside of modernity." In the same way that one cannot understand modernity without the violent sub-narrative known as colonialism, one cannot understand nationality and nationalism without those exclusive practices that alienate and marginalize others.
29. Plato, *The Republic* (Book II: 369-71).
30. John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1971), 8. Rawls argues that his main object of inquiry is justice, the basic structure of society. As such, Rawls seeks out a simple conception of justice and, in this light, limits his project in one way: after noting that he is "concerned with a special case of the problem of justice," he writes, "I shall be satisfied if it is possible to formulate a reasonable conception of justice for the basic structure of society conceived for the time being as a closed system isolated from other societies" (p. 6-7). In a later work, Rawls reemphasizes this limitation when he states, "In developing a Law of Peoples the first step is to work out the principles of justice for domestic society. Here the original position takes into account only persons contained within such a society, since we are not considering relations with other societies. That position views society as closed: persons enter only by birth, and exit only by death." John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 26. See also John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, edited by Erin Kelly (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001), 11-14. I take issue with this limitation since it renders the question of social justice for undocumented people an afterthought. And, as stated above, this limitation reveals some knowledge about the individuals behind the veil of ignorance: they will be citizens (although we may not know if they are poor, rich, Black, White, Gay, able-bodied, etc.).
31. See Mills's contribution to *Contract and Domination* for more on this intergenerational concept of justice. Insofar as political liberalism is concerned, I see my project as trying to do to space what Mills does to time.
32. Maldonado-Torres, et al., 10.
33. See Balibar, "Strangers as Enemies," for more on this idea of borders or what he calls "cosmopolitics" (see note 19 above).
34. See Paula Moya, "Cultural Particularity versus Universal Humanity," *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race and Rights*, edited by Jorge. J. E. Gracia and Pablo De Grieff (New York: Routledge, 2000).

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## *Is There an Ethics of Racial Political Solidarity?!*

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Racial political solidarity has been discussed by a range of philosophers and political theorists in the United States, often in the context of Black-White relations. Tommie Shelby, for example, offers a sympathetic defense of Black unity in the interests of racial justice.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in a recent book, Juliet Hooker articulates some key elements of political solidarity (Hooker 2009). She suggests that for many Western political thinkers, one of the key issues in political solidarity concerns "how to generate feelings of mutual obligation between citizens who are radically different from one another [or] [h]ow citizens

might be made to think beyond the 'I' to the 'we', how they might come to conceive of their self-interest and the public interest as one..."<sup>3</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, in her compelling article, "Comparative Race, Comparative Racisms," describes some of the difficulties of the problem that Hooker describes, by exploring the complexity of political solidarities across racial and ethnic lines; she points to intersectional discriminations that alert different ethnic and immigrant communities to the need to form inter-group alliances.<sup>4</sup> Alcoff's, Shelby's, and Hooker's are all important treatments of political solidarity. There is another dimension of political solidarity that I would like to explore here; it concerns a moral obligation to inter-racial solidarity among and between racial minorities especially in the face of direct racial injustice.

The context with which I am concerned is that of the political or legal ostracization of groups of color; for example, the federal raids on undocumented workers or immigrants. Such practices, besides the direct trauma that results from gratuitous violence, has the additional effects of separating parents from children, income earners from their families, and the upheaval caused by the sudden disappearance and detention of relatives and friends. We have seen an increasing number of such raids on undocumented populations in the last few years, such as those in Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, Texas (Powell 2008), and Southern California in 2008 (Varaorta 2008). Most of these raids were targeted towards Latino immigrants. The New York Times reports that although Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in recent years were to be focused on "carefully planned hunts for dangerous immigrant fugitives" (Bernstein 2009), nearly 96,000 undocumented immigrants were rounded up in programs with names such as "Operation Return to Sender," and fewer than three-quarters of that number were people without criminal convictions. Less well-known is that a significant portion of ICE raids have been directed towards undocumented immigrants from other regions of the globe, including South Asia and the Middle East, who have been profiled for potential terrorist activity.

In such an example, there is a marked absence of racial political solidarity between Latino and South Asian populations (Bijlani 2005), and in some instances, a notable animosity from minority citizens and residents of the United States towards each of these groups (Maira 2004). It is difficult to discern the reasons for the absence; one reason might be that these groups do not understand themselves as having common or overlapping interests. Thus, for example, in California, hostility toward immigrant groups has been, in the context of national U.S. politics, perceived as about "Latinos," whereas it can pertain to multiple immigrant populations that include East, Southeast, and South Asians, Eastern Europeans, and North and Sub-Saharan Africans.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason might be an agreement with the distinct public discourse surrounding the ostracization of each group. Thus, Muslims of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent might be perceived as correctly being under suspicion of terrorist activity, whereas Latinos are perceived as "taking good jobs,"—two distinct statuses pertaining to two distinct immigration groups. However, by taking a larger view, say with regard to a misguided "war on immigrants," which overlaps with a misguided "war on terror," Latinos and South Asians might be able to understand themselves collectively as scapegoats in the larger American political imaginary about "solving the problems of the United States."

In any case, racial political solidarity is significantly diluted in the broader arena of immigrant politics, most notably with regard to concerns that could pertain to multiple immigrant

groups. A more persuasive and effective argument could be made for certain kinds of immigrant rights and protections if (certain kinds or many) immigrant issues were seen to pertain to multiple groups—and if multiple groups were to stand in solidarity with those immigrants who are attacked more directly. Can a case be made for the ethical obligations of minority groups to stand in solidarity with other racialized populations who are the targets of political and legal ostracization? In what follows, I want to explore a case of intra-group hostility, between Muslims and Sikhs of South Asian descent, that if not exacerbating the ostracization of Muslims, at the very least does not alleviate Muslims' ostracization. I argue that rather than distancing themselves from Muslims, Sikhs should stand in solidarity with Muslims in order to illustrate and strengthen the case against the fallacious and irresponsible targeting of random Muslim men and women. By making an argument in favor of intra-group solidarity, I hope that an analogous case can be made for inter-group solidarity, such as between South Asians and Latinos.

### **Sikhs, Muslims, and the TSA**

In August 2007, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) adopted a new policy allowing airport security agents, at their discretion, to remove and screen passenger headgear or subject such passengers to rigorous searches.<sup>6</sup> Ostensibly, the TSA policy was directed towards all persons who passed through United States airports; the list of suspicious headcoverings includes cowboy hats, straw hats, and turbans.<sup>7</sup> While the policy applied to all headcoverings, in a post-9/11 context, it was difficult not to consider this policy as one of a series designed to pressure visible non-Christian minorities to demonstrate their allegiances (or absence of political hostility) to the United States. For Muslims, who have typically been the targets of such policies, proof of allegiance is demonstrated by assimilating as publicly secular citizens, thereby demonstrating that they have prioritized their political allegiance to the American state over their religious commitments.

Not surprisingly, in the weeks following the adoption of this policy, loud protests were lodged around the world. However, they were lodged not by Muslims but by the Sikh community, which, by virtue of its own displays of faith, would also be subject to this new regulation. In numerous media articles, Sikh leaders pointed out that this new policy was unjust because it violated their freedom to practice their faith without interference. They also pointed out that the new policy was particularly grievous because it conflated Sikhs with Muslims. As one leader pointed out, "[Sikhs] are always ready to help the Department of Homeland Security as a community. No Sikh has ever been involved in such cases, and they know that."<sup>8</sup> As another Sikh said, "We do not say the new rule was made to target the Sikhs. But it is the Sikhs who face the harassment."<sup>9</sup> These comments reflected the position that the Sikh population in the United States was an innocent, law-abiding one, implicitly distinguishing themselves from other populations in the United States, such as Muslims, who, after the events of September 11, 2001, and despite very few confirmed cases of terrorism or criminality, are generally perceived to be more nefarious.

The basis of the Sikh community's objection was that the turban, though publicly conspicuous, was not intended as a symbol of political resistance, nor did it indicate a refusal to assimilate. Rather, the turbans that Sikh men (and some Sikh women) wear were signs of a faith that was compatible with a publicly/politically secular society. The contrast that they drew between themselves and Muslims insinuated that such a position was not necessarily true of Muslims. Their approach deepened the implicit bifurcation that they wished to emphasize between "good Sikhs" and "bad Muslims."



Assimilation, whether cultural, racial, linguistic, or political, is often asserted to be—if not a requirement—then at least conducive to a shared national identity. It has been argued that when the notion of a shared national identity is threatened by the interests of culturally diverse groups, or when cultural diversity threatens to undermine a sense of belonging together, the state should pursue a policy of assimilation. Andrew Mason gives the following definition of an assimilationist policy: it aims to produce an outcome in which members of some cultural community abandon at least some of their customs and practices” (Mason 1999, 266). Such a policy may or may not be justifiable, depending upon the issue in question and political and historical context of the community under scrutiny.

Before entering into a discussion concerning the ethics of assimilation, I want to think about why the question of assimilation appears to take on a salience, or even a coherence, after several decades during which North American and Western European societies have heralded multiculturalism, purported to embrace new immigrants, and generally insisted that—at least in the United States—immigrants are the key to a flourishing polity and economy. Prior to those decades, and now once again, almost nine years into the “War on Terror,” it is a long-standing position on the part of European nation-states to take an assimilationist stance regarding incoming populations. This may be somewhat understandable on one level, i.e., when we consider that the framework of the nation-state has been predicated on kinship, tribal relations, and/or blood-ties.<sup>10</sup> If the telos of the nation-state was one of a harmony based on cultural, political, and moral norms, then it would make sense that a similar harmony based on some fundamental common traits—if not an outright cultural/political/ethnic homogeneity—would be actively pursued by the state. Although this framework does not apply to most of North America, the United States has seen moments that duplicate the “pseudo-ethnic” model of nation-states in the interest of “nation-building,” precisely for the purposes of reproducing the cohesive unity of ethnic nationalism. Consider, for example, the effects of the Japanese Internment, the McCarthy Era and the hunt for Communists, and now the “War on Terror,” which has produced clear divisions between “good Americans” and outsiders. For both the United States and much of Western Europe, the threat of outside invaders required that one be able to trust one’s neighbors and fellow citizens; this trust would be more often than not predicated upon a similarity of norms that could be generally assured by the presence of a culturally similar populace.

And so, it might be understandable that foreignness and strangers are considered to be among those things that tightly knit nation-states based on ethnic communities’ fear. Elsewhere, I discuss the fears that “strange” persons and groups evoke in dominant or “domestic” populations—fears about whether new or unfamiliar persons (immigrants) have the same sets of commitments, scruples, sense of loyalty as “we” do; the disruption to the sense of harmony of living among familiar people; the unpredictability of unfamiliar peoples.<sup>11</sup> These fears—or perhaps legitimate concerns—might enable us to understand better, even if we may disagree, the impetus behind the pressuring of new immigrants to assimilate: by assimilating, we are better able to believe (even if mistakenly) that groups who assimilate are more likely to share the values, norms, expectations, and aspirations of a dominant group, and thereby less likely to “turn on us.” As such, the issue of assimilation has re-emerged as one of urgent importance in the eight years since the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Because the perpetrators of these attacks were thought to undertake the attacks in the name of Islam, Muslims at large have been under intense scrutiny not

only in the United States, but world-wide. The 9-11 attacks have exacerbated the general suspicion that those in the secular world have had regarding the “Muslim” world generally, in no small part because of the alleged conflation between religion and politics, held to be sine qua non of Islam, and in turn between that identification and a commitment to violent action against non-Muslims. In the world over, then, it is not surprising that those whose expressions of their commitment to Islam are conspicuous (such as Muslim women who wear the hijab or, in some parts of the world, Muslim men who wear “turbans”) have come under scrutiny regarding their commitment to peace, democratic political processes, and living harmoniously with non-Muslims.

As part of that telos of building and confirming a “pseudo-ethnic” model of the nation-state, the United States “has restricted immigration in different ways to different groups depending upon who or what is considered to pose a threat to national security.”<sup>12</sup> Also as part of that telos, U.S. immigration law has been based on distinguishing between “good” and “bad” aliens, understood as those capable of assimilation versus those who are not.<sup>13</sup> But in addition to shaping immigration law, the United States—like many European nations—has deployed a wide range of policies aimed to induce assimilation among perceived “out” groups at the risk of ostracization, persecution, or criminal punishment. We know these policies by other names: racial profiling, promoting the separation of (certain) church(es) and state, anti-free speech laws, anti-“conspiracy” laws, state-directed wiretapping and surveillance, studied indifference to crimes committed against minority populations, etc. On the surface, these laws and policies seem to vary widely: they appear to deal precisely with those issues after which they are named. Some might argue that many of these laws are about racism and discrimination. While both of these claims are correct, they do not preclude the fact that they are all designed to shape and mold the polity and the comportment of its denizens at the risk of being targeted by the Damoclesian sword. Implicitly articulated is the test that asks which side of the law a particular group is on. The standard behind the test can be articulated through the question: Are you willing to be one of us? Or, alternatively, how far are you willing to go to be one of us? After all, this is the implied legitimate expectation of European nation-states to newcomers.<sup>14</sup> It is hardly surprising that the United States, if it has indeed appropriated the European model with the absence of required blood- or kinship ties, would try to reconstitute this requirement metaphorically—through the expectation of a certain cultural deportment in lieu of a conformity of norms that is a latent expectation of kinship relations or blood-ties.

In this regard, the 2007 TSA policy was an assimilationist policy. When this policy is considered in combination with a range of other assimilationist policies that are carried out within national contexts—especially following national tragedies such as the events of September 11, 2001—or in “international border zones” such as airports, where there are few Constitutional protections that apply to any passengers—whether they are citizens, visitors, or residents—such policies effectively create incentives to “interpellate” to the politically hegemonic notion of a “good citizen,” out of fear for one’s personal security, safety, livelihood, and the interests of one’s family and dependents. As Karen Engle points out, the interpellation of a good citizen creates an immediate all-or-nothing bifurcation that requires one to behave absolutely and completely according to the criteria of “good citizenship”; otherwise, one runs the risk of being cast out into the “bad citizen” category.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for cultural/religious communities such as Sikhs and Muslims, it is imperative that they assimilate to certain public norms—or show other ways in which they have assimilated—in order to

certify that they are indeed part of the shared national identity, and thus to escape potential persecution.

In the context of assimilation, I wonder about the relationship/obligations that one group has to another in terms of alliances to resist the pressure to assimilate. The expectation that minority cultures may be required to abandon certain practices in order to assimilate raises an interesting dynamic between certain minority cultures: the pressure from a minority culture who has already “assimilated” or considered to be “assimilated” upon another population to do so as well.<sup>16</sup> The flip side of assimilationist policies is that it pressures communities that are perceived as remaining aloof or outside a shared national framework to illustrate their cooperation by assimilating or showing why they have already assimilated in certain important ways.

The urgency of an assimilationist policy is found in the possibility that certain culturally diverse practices are disruptive of a shared national identity.<sup>17</sup> Jack Straw, former Labor MP; former Prime Minister Tony Blair; former French President Jacques Chirac, and numerous other Danish and Dutch leaders have suggested that headscarves, along with turbans, have become an indication of resistance or dissent from norms such as “cosmopolitanism,” “individual autonomy,” public transparency, and, most of all, politically friendly/cooperative members of a polity. Whether or not we can fairly agree that these norms are being resisted by Muslim men and women, it is not evident that the large majority of this population who may be resisting is doing so in any way that is other than completely peaceful. In fact, none of the detainees who have been incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay, or interrogated under NSEERS,<sup>18</sup> under suspicion of potential violent political action have ever been charged or convicted of terrorist activity or other violent (non-immigration) crimes.<sup>19</sup>

Another primary source of the pressure to assimilate emerges from the discursive claim to separate religion and politics in a liberal polity: this claim is in evidence in a range of locations: in the work of scholars such as John Rawls,<sup>20</sup> in certain popular readings of the U.S. Constitution, and in the ability of western media to raise the fear of some populations who refuse to separate their religious beliefs from their moral/political beliefs.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, there is clear evidence of the pressure on Muslims to “assimilate,” at least in certain ways, to the norms of a non-Muslim Western public. And, indeed, to that end, and in the interests of promoting good liberal citizenship, in March 2004, the French government passed a ban on expressions of religious faith in public institutions after an eighteen-month investigation into the impact of this ban by a committee composed of various religious and political leaders. This ban reinforced a prohibition on “conspicuous” religious symbols as distinguished from discreet symbols, and ostensibly directed against the hijab, that was articulated in 1994, and which set off a long-standing uproar.<sup>22</sup>

Surprisingly—or perhaps not—some time after the ban was passed, Sikhs of French descent joined together in a protest against the ban, on the grounds that the ban violated their ability to practice their faith. Much of France was shocked by the Sikh response; many had never considered the fact that the ban against conspicuous expressions of faith would affect the—admittedly tiny—Sikh population in France. This surprise seemed to confirm that the ban was really intended for the Muslim population in France.

If there is reason to suspect that Muslims are more prone to transgress the norms upheld by British and other international political leaders because of their past collective history of violent political action—as grounded upon their religious commitments, then the same is arguably true for Sikhs as well. If there are

grounds to pressure a Muslim community to abandon some of its practices, then there are presumably grounds to pressure the Sikh community to do so as well. Militant Sikhs have been integral players in a number of violent political actions and protests in India, for example: the long-standing armed conflict in Punjab between Sikh militants and the Indian government, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in retaliation for the attack on the Golden Temple at Amritsar; the declaration of Amritsar as the independent Sikh State of Khalistan (in 1986), among other events. And yet, the sight of Sikh men and women wearing turbans—if understood as such—rarely invokes the same response for cultural assimilation. Perhaps this is because they are not the source of a widespread political fear right now, but perhaps also because we do—rightly—distinguish the acts of a militant minority from the larger non-militant minority group.

Clearly, then, Sikhs—within the context of North America and Western Europe—despite the similarity of practices and of the principles that those practices signify, are not under the same pressure to assimilate as Muslims in the same contexts. This distinction in treatment and expectations has created an interesting dual status for Sikhs and Muslims, one which has induced a subtle repositioning between these two minority populations, such that Sikhs are understood as—at the very least—not a dangerous, disruptive, or hostile minority population. Notice, for example, that the Sikh population was specifically commended in the USA PATRIOT Act, passed a month after 9-11, as being “good” citizens within the United States.<sup>23</sup> The PATRIOT Act exhorted the recognition that all Muslims were not terrorists, but it went several steps further in acknowledging Sikhs: it recognized that the Sikhs stood in resolute support of the U.S. government

to bring the terrorists and those that harbor them to justice. It recognized that the Sikh faith is a distinct religion with a distinct religious and ethnic identity that has its own places of worship and a distinct holy text and religious tenets; [and it] call[ed] upon local and Federal law enforcement authorities to work to prevent crimes against all Americans, including Sikh-Americans; and...to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law all those who commit crimes.<sup>24</sup>

These same endorsements were notably absent in relation to the Muslim and Arab communities.

Eamon Callan suggests that “[t]he distinction between assimilation and complicity in oppression is liable to become blurred whenever a culture is under direct assault from assimilationist practices.” He develops the position that when there is pressure to assimilate, those who do so might be considered victims, and therefore are not morally blameworthy. Sikhs, independently of how conspicuous some of their religious practices may be, are considered to be a part of the American polity—and perhaps also a part of a shared national identity in a way that Muslims are not. Prior to 9-11, they were perceived to be “good” members of the polity; but after the events of 9-11, they faced the same Faustian pact that many South Asian and Arab communities did: of having to actively demonstrate their allegiance to the American polity in order to escape the suspicion of being traitors, enemies, or some other danger. Then we can see why they are favorably recognized in the PATRIOT Act as good, law-abiding citizens; in exchange for this favorable recognition, they agree to continue to demonstrate their allegiances to the polity by standing “resolutely in support of the commitment of our Government to bring the terrorists and those that harbor them to justice.”<sup>25</sup>

In this regard, assimilationist policies are not simply about disruption to the shared identity of a community, as many of its proponents argue. Rather, I would suggest that the “disruption” is more about the fear of the “strange,” or of a community that sheds doubt on the cultural and moral certitude of our self-complacent existence. Fear is an insufficient basis upon which to ask a community to abandon the practice of wearing the hijab or the turban; the purpose of democratic procedures, or of constitutional protection of minorities from democratic majorities,<sup>26</sup> is precisely to distinguish the fears of the populace from the rightful harms to the community; presumably this distinction emerges through the set of procedures by which specific harm must be shown before a community/member of a community can be banned from a certain practice. It is not clear that the widespread fear of “potential terrorists” is a harm rather than a prejudice.<sup>27</sup> If this is so, then perhaps the focus of assimilationist policies should be on the assimilation of prejudiced communities into a more open-minded, open-hearted society, one that recognizes that neither headgear nor physical differences, nor those who have explicitly different religious commitments from ourselves, are threats; such a revised focus would recognize that fear and prejudice are the threats to national security and to a shared national identity.

It may be the case, as Callan argues, that groups who assimilate under coercion are hardly morally blameworthy, since they do so at the risk of extreme oppression. It is easy to accept that Sikhs are under tremendous pressure to be “good citizens” in order to be spared the persecution of being cast into the “bad citizen” category, as Muslims have generally. However, although the principles by which Sikhs might stand as being outside the shared national identity are the same as for Muslims, the grounds by which Muslims are being called on to assimilate conspicuously are not the same as for Sikhs: Muslims are called upon to give up visible traces of their religious commitments, whereas Sikhs are not—except insofar as they are caught up in the dragnet intended for Muslims. Also, Muslims—as Sikhs have been exhorted to do—are called upon to give up those who may be under suspicion of violating material support statutes, i.e., aiding and abetting terrorists/potential terrorist activity. However, under current politics, Muslims—and not Sikhs—are under suspicion for potential terrorist activity. Muslims are expected much more directly, actively, and immediately to illustrate that they are not “bad citizens,” i.e., to show that they are not associating with politically or religiously active Muslims, mostly by being willing to cooperate with the FBI as informants by turning over the names of family, friends, and close associates—regardless of evidence of guilt, but rather as evidence that the Muslims under pressure to cooperate with FBI are not guilty (many examples: Lodi).

By deliberately keeping quiet when assimilationist policies against Muslims are debated, is the Sikh population failing to uphold a certain moral obligation to pre-emptively defend or help Muslims resist the pressure to assimilate? The salient question in this context is: Are Sikhs complicitous in facilitating the American state’s cultural persecution of Muslims—a population that is similar to them by many accounts, but which (unlike themselves) is being directly targeted for assimilation?

The irony of the “good citizen” status of Sikhs in the contemporary U.S. is that less than 100 years ago, they were considered “bad citizens” in the same way that Muslims are today. At that time, Punjabi Sikhs became the target of a collusion between the British and U.S. governments to restrain their political agitation for home rule in India. The British government tried and hanged 75 men in Lahore (then under British control) for sedition. The grounds that the British offered were that 6,000 Sikh men had gathered in Sacramento

for the purposes of orchestrating an overthrow of the British government in India.<sup>28</sup> Aside from the blatant fabrication of this evidence (there were less than 6,000 Indians of any kind—Punjabis, Sikhs, Hindus, or Muslims anywhere in Western North America), their convictions were then used by the United States government to try 100 men, most Punjabi Sikh and several Germans, for their (legal) political activities in the United States. The charges were extreme, ephemeral, and the result of long and arduous attempts to find laws that they were actually breaking.<sup>29</sup>

The above anecdote has no bearing on the moral weight that Sikhs bear regarding their protests to assimilationist policies directed towards themselves and other minority communities. However, as an important historical fact that has been nearly completely forgotten, it is helpful to excavate it when considering the way that any minority population has a responsibility to avert assimilationist policies without necessarily affirming, endangering, or facilitating the ostracization of other minority groups. And so, perhaps an affirmative answer should be offered to the question of whether Sikhs have an obligation to stand in solidarity with Muslims to resist their cultural and political persecution. Yes—at least as much as any other population. For any number of reasons: happenstance, moral luck, and their perceived assimilation, in a post-9-11 world, Sikhs are perceived as unthreatening despite the fact that they share many salient characteristics similar to the Muslim population under pressure. And in that space of acceptance, when minority communities do escape the harsh light of persecution (or the pressure of assimilation), there is a moral obligation to aid other minority communities in resisting a similar persecution. As such, there is something troubling about the response of the Sikh community to policies such as those of the French and American states. By resorting to such a narrow basis upon which to object to the TSA’s assimilationist policy, Sikhs have not satisfactorily resisted the policy. In defending their religious commitments exclusively on the grounds of freedom of religion, they are not merely passively affirming or participating in a good-immigrant/bad-immigrant strategy; they are helping the American state deploy an active bifurcation of good-citizen/bad citizen moral-political framework. By remaining silent until certain assimilationist/pre-emptive terrorist policing policies target them directly, Sikhs are helping to perpetuate the myth that one “must assimilate” in some visible way—if not by shedding one’s headgear, then by shedding one’s loyalties and allegiances to friends, family, community, and fellow targeted immigrants. How one or a group resists an assimilationist policy is as morally imbued as the decision to resist itself.

In addition, I wonder if, along with Sikhs, many other minority populations in a post-9-11 context are not also charged with a moral obligation to protest pre-emptively against such targeted assimilationist policies directed against Muslims. There are ways in which Sikhs, but also other religious and ethnic communities, could have stood in defense of Muslims and themselves, in the spirit of a racial political solidarity. The Sikh population, as well as Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and other orthodox Christian and Jewish communities, could argue, for example, that Muslims are like themselves, in that it is possible to combine a commitment to their religious principles with a commitment to their political practices and still be co-operative, friendly, denizens of a Western polity. It is possible to illustrate that many Muslims, like many Sikhs, orthodox Jews, and Christians, live peaceably, without threat of harm to the community at large, despite their political positions, potential political dissent with the foreign policy of the United States or France, or their wish for a religious state. It was possible for Sikhs to argue that the pronounced and focused racial profiling of Muslims, imposed under the blackmail tactics to turn over members of their kin or

community, is unethical, and to hold themselves up as exemplars, as political active members of a liberal, Western polity who are a threat to no one in their community.

In this vein, other immigrant populations might—should—have stood up in alliance with Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, to help Muslims resist persecution, but also to illustrate that they had common interests in standing together to resist the fallacious advances of the state to target immigrants for the purposes of political gain and winning elections. By the same token, South Asians have a sustained interest in standing with Latinos to resist a “war on immigrants.”

It is possible to illustrate that the unwillingness to comply with the mistaken assimilationist pressures of the U.S. or England or France is not a sign of a potential threat to these societies, but rather a desire to protect their religious and political consciences. Instead, Sikhs—like many other groups who have escaped targeting by the state momentarily—have chosen to express their dissent with U.S. domestic policies only when these policies interfere with their own cultural, religious, and political commitments. Moreover, another strategy that has been very popular, as we saw in the quote from the PATRIOT Act, is to further ostracize Muslims by heightening the public awareness of their own group as model citizens who do not engage in bombing or violent political action—thus heightening a perceived moral contrast between the two groups.

In the latter regard, I'm not sure I can fairly criticize the Sikh population—in distinction from the Hindu population, the South Asian community, or any of the other myriad self-identifying groups who have momentarily escaped the scrutiny of the state. In the same way that Sikhs have an obligation to speak in defense of Muslims, so do other minority communities have an obligation to speak in defense of another minority culture. These communities' response to assimilationist tactics such as those described above has also been to comply and conform with those tactics—which require no particular courage (especially if doing so does not affect that group's cultural commitments)—as if these are tests of one's virtuosity as a citizen.<sup>30</sup> However, by remaining silent—especially in the absence of direct state-directed assimilation or hostility—these communities are also helping the state deploy and reinforce the good-citizen/bad-citizen disciplinary framework to further ostracize Muslims and, in turn, other groups, as a “strange” group, whose ways must be alien, since there are plenty of “good minorities” who have happily integrated and assimilated into the dominant culture.

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### Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Ethics Center of Vanderbilt University, September 20, 2007, on a panel organized by Kathryn Gines, entitled the Ethics of Assimilation. I thank Kathryn, Howard McGary, David Kim, Mariana Ortega, and the audience at this panel for their helpful comments.
2. Shelby 2005.
3. Hooker 2009, 23.
4. Alcoff 2007.
5. Latinos constitute the majority of immigrants in California, although the second largest group is from Asian countries (Johnson 2008).
6. Adopted August 4, 2007. See <http://www.tsa.gov/> for a general description of the policy.
7. Sullivan 2007. Notably, neither hijabs nor yamulkes are on the list; however, at least some Islamic organizations perceive these policies as pertaining to Muslim women. The Council on American-Islamic Relations has advised Muslim women on the proper protocol by which to submit to extensive screenings. Religious Profiling: New TSA Policy on Head Covering (CAIR News Release; August 28, 2007; found at <http://makkah.wordpress.com/2007/08/29/religious-profiling-new-tsa-policy-on-head-covering/>). I can find no official list on the Transportation Security Administration website, although I have obtained the official “religious” advisory as issued by the TSA:  
“On August 4th, 2007, TSA implemented revisions to its screening procedures for head coverings. TSA does not

conduct ethnic or religious profiling and employs multiple checks and balances to ensure profiling does not happen. All members of the traveling public are permitted to wear head coverings (whether religious or not) through the security checkpoints. The new standard procedures subject all persons wearing head coverings to the possibility of additional security screening, which may include a pat-down search of the head covering. Individuals may be referred for additional screening if the TSO cannot reasonably determine that the head area is free of a detectable threat item. If the issue cannot be resolved through a pat-down search, the individual will be offered the opportunity to remove the head covering in a private screening area. TSA's security procedures, including the procedures for screening head coverings, are designed to ensure the security of the traveling public. These procedures are part of TSA's multi-layered approach to security screening."

8. Kuldip Singh, managing director of United Sikhs, as cited in Lum 2007.
9. Joseph 2007.
10. Connor.
11. Sheth 2009, Ch. 3
12. Engle 2004, 64
13. Ibid.
14. Brubaker 1992.
15. Engle 2004.
16. Hannah Arendt calls this tendency (within the context of the same ethnic group) the relationship between the parvenu and the pariah. Elsewhere, I have used her terms to discuss the relationship between different minority populations.
17. Mason 1999, Mason 1999, 267.
18. 2001 National Special Entry/Exit Registration System. Shora and Wadhia 2009.
19. They have been charged with "conspiracy," which is legally distinct, and less onerous to convict, than a murder charge.
20. I have written about Rawls in Sheth 2009, chap. 3
21. CNN, Atlantic Monthly, The New Republic, and the New York Times (especially in the years immediately after 9-11) figure as chief perpetrators of these alarms.
22. Known as the "François Bayrou memo," or the "Circulaire Bayrou." See Laborde 2005, 326
23. When comparing the respective passages from the USA PATRIOT Act regarding Muslim/Arab Americans [Sec. 102] and Sikh Americans [Sec. 1002], one will notice that while Congress "recognizes" that populations have many law-abiding members, they reserve their exhortations that crimes be prevented or fully punished only in regard to Sikh Americans.
24. Ibid.
25. Op. cit. n.30 SEC. 1002
26. See Federalist Papers, no. 6
27. Apparently, some 80,000 men have been detained, and charges have not been brought against any of them, David Cole points out (Interview w/ Amy Goodman, Democracy Now, September 11, 2001).
28. Jensen 1979, 74
29. Jensen 1979, 75, Hoover 1985, Brown 1948 See Sheth 2009 for a longer description of this event.
30. I am thinking of tactics such as quelling one's political dissent publically, "complying" with Federal exhortations to report suspicious activities—especially when these suspicious activities have often to do with Muslims who are perceptibly/openly religious—thereby helping to enforce the forced assimilationist policies imposed by the state—being receptive to policies that intrude into one's private life (wiretapping, FBI queries, increased surveillance), on the grounds that these policies are fine "unless one has something to hide."

## *What Is Interpretation? Images and Thoughts about Philosophy and Art*

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In place of a dedication, Jorge Gracia's new book leads with an exurge from the surrealist painter René Magritte: "Las Meninas," Magritte is quoted as saying, "is the visible image of Velázquez's invisible thought." The motto prefigures the theme of this book and also its anxieties. Under the title *Images of Thought*, Gracia presents what he takes to be the invisible thought in the visible images of Carlos Estévez's art.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, even remarkably for a philosophy book, the quality of the reproductions of Estévez's paintings, drawings, and installations included in the text—all full-color; on free-standing pages, so no text bleeds through the image from behind—invites the reader to test Gracia's interpretations of the thoughts otherwise invisible on the visible surfaces of those visual works of art. Unless the quality of the reproductions bears no relation to the quality of the interpretations. Unless there is already something visible in those images, Estévez's otherwise invisible thoughts, that is visible without variation in reproductions of them, and we are meant to measure Gracia's interpretations as a second-order visibility, a remaking visible philosophically of what was already visible in purely visual terms. The tension in this line of reasoning begins to address the anxiety that is palpable in Gracia's text and that Gracia makes explicit when he asks, "are the interpretations I have provided legitimate, and if so, why?" (155).

We will want to test this legitimacy, the question of legitimacy, the terms Gracia uses to evaluate its claim, and the conditions that lead him to ask the question. There is a worry that the strong distinction Gracia makes in the book between meaning philosophical interpretations and relational philosophical interpretations is artificially constructed to respond to an exaggerated division between philosophy and art and that this distinction is introduced to legitimate the philosophical quality of Gracia's interpretation. There have been many successful philosophical interpretations of works of visual art (we discuss some of them below) and a history of philosophers opposing philosophy to art need not bind us to that opposition. In the end, we will want to ask whose thoughts Gracia makes visible in his interpretations and whether it matters to Estévez, his art, and the philosophical interpretation of art in general.

We will draw these tests and questions from a register that very well may be defined by the exurge from Magritte, because just insofar as that motto prefigures the theme and anxieties of Gracia's book, it sounds tones that open that register to a larger and well-trafficked discourse on visibility, invisibility, art, the interpretation of art, and philosophy itself. The statement evokes, of course, the thought and writings of Michel Foucault, through Foucault's association with Magritte—the monograph *This is Not a Pipe* and the correspondence between Foucault and Magritte appended to that study<sup>2</sup> and including Foucault's invocation of Magritte in an introduction to a collection of photographs by Duane Michals<sup>3</sup>—and in relation to Foucault's ekphrasis on the great painting by the Spanish Baroque artist that thematizes visibility and invisibility so prominently.<sup>4</sup> In *This is Not a Pipe*, Foucault troubles the relation of words and images that haunts Gracia's reflections on the relation of philosophy and art and, so, Gracia's concerns about the legitimacy of his philosophical interpretations of Estévez's works of art. In his ekphrasis of *Las Meninas*, which precisely in virtue of its thematic of visibility and invisibility is also an interpretation,

Foucault unfolds a genealogy of thought as representation—the invisible made visible—as it is imaged in Velázquez's painting in anticipation of the model of thought developed in the modern period to put an end to the classical age of the painting itself.

The associations that follow from thinking thought as representation could occupy us for some time. If we restrict our thoughts to the thematic of visibility and invisibility, explicitly referenced by Magritte and invoked by Foucault, we cannot help commenting on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thoughts about the visible and the invisible worked out, in part, through interpretations of paintings by Paul Cézanne.<sup>5</sup> The main point of Merleau-Ponty's late writings, that the visible and invisible are intertwined, that the invisible makes visible what would otherwise remain invisible, that the visible in this way makes the invisible visible, already speaks to the theme of visible images of invisible thoughts. It is thought, after all, that is invisibly intertwined in what Merleau-Ponty calls the "flesh" of the world, the invisible made visible by the invisibility of thought. But that thought is itself also flesh, the invisible that becomes visible in the visibility of the world. Flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, is the intertwining of the visible and the invisible. Flesh is Merleau-Ponty's answer to the question of representation: thought grasps the world the way the right hand grasps the left. Since both are flesh, the one knows the other; the other anticipates the one, before the twain have met.

Such a scheme would quell Gracia's anxieties about the legitimization of his interpretations were it not for his aversion to collapsing perceived distinctions—philosophy and art, for example—for the purposes of overcoming them. Gracia argues vigorously against any such shortcut. "Philosophy cannot become art, and art cannot become philosophy," he writes. "Any attempt at putting them together turns philosophy into art or art into philosophy, destroying the other in the process" (200). Which makes it all the more curious that Gracia uses a quotation from Magritte as an emblem for his book. By virtue of being an exemplar for making images of thought, Magritte marks out a territory where philosophy and art meet, perhaps mix, and often appear to overlap. This is certainly how Foucault interprets him. And the interpretation appears well-suited to Magritte's art.

Take the image that shares its title with Foucault's interpretation of it, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1926). There is nothing special about the visual elements of the image, which lends to its being reproduced by the artist in a second version titled *La trahison des images* (1928-9). (In yet another iteration, *Les Deux mystères* (1966), a continuation of the thought begun forty years earlier, the original is reproduced on an easel set up before an image of the pipe from that original hovering above it.) What is visible in the image is just what is invisible in it, the thought. Or, better put, what we see here is an image that gets us thinking. There is no single thought here, just an invitation to entertain the puzzle posed by the relations of words and images, of thought rendered in words and images. Foucault's study and interpretation of this image focuses, again, on representation. The representation of a pipe is not a pipe, of course, but a representation of it, yet the representation of the judgment, "ceci n'est pas une pipe," for the same reason, because it is a representation of that judgment, cannot be believed. What are we to think? Gracia loves these puzzles. He bibliographs Foucault's study. If Magritte is an exemplar for Estévez, is Gracia inviting us to test the legitimacy of his interpretations against the standard set by Foucault?

When we turn to Gracia's interpretations of Estévez's art, we find at first ample attention to the visual details of the images. The interpretation of *Self-Fishing* (2006), titled "Know Yourself," begins with a careful catalogue of the details of the image: that

it is a collage, that the central figure has the characteristics of a puppet, that the fish swimming in the transparent torso have been cut out from some other medium and pasted in place, that there are fish swimming in the figure's head which are inaccessible with the line extended by the rod and reel the figure wields, that there are red dots on the hands, the feet, the forehead, and the glans of the penis. "This work suggests, in a vivid and graphic way," Gracia's commentary begins, "a view concerning the acquisition of knowledge that has been a major player in philosophy since its beginning" (21). The nature of this "suggesting"—the verb Gracia most often uses in connecting Estévez's images to the thoughts he has about them—will tell us whether Gracia's interpretations are legitimate. But is this suggestion enough? How exactly does the image suggest, vividly and graphically, this particular philosophical theme? Is this suggestion idiosyncratic? How is it generalizable? In this particular case, we may have wanted a more explicit connection of fishing to learning. The skilled angler is not surprised by what she catches. Amateurs are happy to catch anything at all. What can this observation tell us about what we accept as a metaphor of self-knowledge in this painting? Is a metaphor of self-knowledge thought? Is a metaphor knowledge at all?

Let's look at another of Gracia's interpretations, this time of Estévez's *The Juggler* (2002), which takes its title, "Negotiating Identities," from the subject of an NEH Summer Seminar in 2006.<sup>6</sup> In this interpretation, which plumbs a theme Gracia has explored extensively, the image gets considerably less attention. It is described in a few lines. Gracia's ordinarily careful eye misses the connection of the green dots on the feet, the hands, the head, and the penis, to the lines—six of them and not four—that extend to and beyond the top edge (they do not "disappear") of the image. The figure, here, is another puppet, with indications, this time, that it is being manipulated from above. And there is a hint of what there may be above in the connection of the red dot at the heart of the central figure to green dots on the hands, head, feet, and penis of the figures in the next order of magnitude and of the red dot in these figures to green dots on the hands, heads, feet, and penis of the figures they juggle, in turn. Is there a heart at the end of the lines that extend from the appendages of the central puppet above and beyond what is visible in the image?

Gracia's brief description of this image is introduced by ruminations on Gracia's own identity or identities. It's a complicated business, the identity of this Jorge Jesús Emiliano Gracia: Cuban, Canadian, Hispanic and Latino, American, owner of a condo in Toronto and a house in Buffalo, husband, father, grandfather, professor, and writer. We all have our stories. Being so many things, Gracia finds himself negotiating or juggling his identities, and this leads him to think that Estévez's image "indicates that in some sense we juggle ourselves. But how is this possible?" Gracia asks. "Am I more than one person? And what does all of this have to do with philosophy?" (93). This last question is telling. It speaks, again, to the undercurrent of anxiety in Gracia's text. It pitches the question of legitimacy in terms of the properly philosophical contributions made by Gracia's interpretations. Here, the case is negotiated in terms of competing essentialist and eliminativist conceptions of personal identity. Gracia rejects both options and argues for a Wittgensteinian alternative. His many selves share a family resemblance, which compares with the way Estévez's image "suggests," again, "that the person is the same and whatever identity is being juggled is not something different from himself" (94).

This interpretation seems forced. It rejects without comment the possibility that we may be multiple.<sup>7</sup> It reduces Sartre's philosophy to his existentialism, which Gracia curiously



equates with eliminativism and associates, more curiously still, with free choice, a concept inconsistent with Sartre's views from the Critique of Dialectical Reason forward.<sup>8</sup> But, more importantly, it ignores elements of Estévez's image for the sake of developing a thought that may or may not be related (how can we know?) to that image. The fact that the main figure in the image is a puppet and manipulated in a way that appears the same as the way it manipulates the figures it appears to juggle, perhaps suggests that juggling is a kind of manipulation or that manipulation is a kind of juggling. The role of the heart in this juggling/manipulating. The way that every figure juggled appears to juggle other figures like it in just the way it is juggled. The differences in the order of magnitude. The possibility, the suggestion, that this juggling may go "all the way down," in both directions. Are there yet smaller but invisible figures juggled by the smallest figures still visible in the image and a multiplicity of figures, invisible and on an order of magnitude of our central figure and larger still, who are the centers of ever so much more juggling? Is it possible that something other than identity is at stake here? What if this image is a detail of a much larger image of the universe represented as an infinite juggling of elements, which, by virtue of being part of this universe, are identical to one another, just so many modes of one univocal substance?<sup>9</sup>

The point is not to argue for the superiority of one interpretation over another, but to point out that there is an interpretation we might arrive at by starting with the images and thinking through the images to thoughts made visible in the image itself. This is what I take to be characteristic of Foucault's treatments of Velázquez and Magritte. In his interpretations, Foucault exhausts the image, not because he comments on every detail of the images (that would be exhausting) but because he analyses select details in such depth that the invisible significance of every other detail is made visible as well. He takes a paragraph or more tracing the itinerary of light in the Velázquez. He painstakingly unpacks the restricted inventory of Magritte's images of pipes. Svetlana Alpers, whose ground-breaking interpretations of northern Renaissance art are characteristically grounded in details of the image, argues for an appreciation of Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas* in which she finds an affinity with her own working methods.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, even when he leads with a description of one of Estévez's images, *Shared Kingdom* (2006), for example, Gracia works very quickly to a discursive account of thoughts he relates to those images. Gracia draws those thoughts almost exclusively from traditional philosophical sources (and openly draws titles for his interpretations from those same sources). If there is a question to be raised about this work, it is whether the anxiety about the philosophical legitimacy of its interpretations has led Gracia to substitute the visibility (or legibility) of thoughts taken from the canon of philosophy for the thoughts made visible in Estévez's images. Whose thoughts does Gracia make visible? What difference does this interpretation make to Estévez's art?

The point, this time, is not to contend, as an antidote for the anxiety that haunts Gracia, that whatever thoughts we come to in an appreciation of Estévez's images can only legitimately be what Estévez himself was thinking (invisibly) and intended to make visible. As Gracia says, "Why bother with the artist's understanding when in fact the artist sought to present that understanding through the work and regards that as its best expression?" (199). It is rather to insist on an attention to what Estévez in fact makes visible in his images, on a longer lingering with the visible elements of those images, on a closer association of what is visible in the image and the invisible thoughts just those visible elements occasion. The work of art makes those invisible thoughts visible to someone, the artist, minimally, as part of the audience for the work. The interpretation, arguably, aims to communicate what is visible to the interpreter for

whatever audience, minimally including the interpreter; there may be for that interpretation. In Gracia's interpretations, what is visible to the interpreter need not be what is immediately visible to the audience for that interpretation. Gracia describes his own interpretations as "instrumental" and "relational."

"The interpretations of Estévez's art presented in this book," Gracia writes, "take the form of essays whose aim is to produce philosophical understandings in the readers of this book" (199). This is how Gracia describes the instrumental quality of his interpretations. Does he mean that readers of his book do not have philosophical understandings of Estévez's art prior to reading his essays? Gracia says there are problems that bedevil interpretations that attempt to say what a work of art means. If we ignore (wisely, I would say) what the artist says his work means and reject as historical and non-philosophical accounts of what one or another audience might have thought the work meant, we are left with what meaning the work has independent of the artist and its audience. Viable options, Gracia says. "But why not go beyond these and try to explore the art in terms of philosophical ideas that have been frequent in the history of philosophy?" (199, emphasis added). This assumes that the questions philosophers have asked are trans-historical. It assumes, in addition, that we all know and agree about what philosophy is. Is this too much to assume? Do precisely these assumptions lead to Gracia's anxieties about the legitimacy of his interpretations?

Aristotle—who said, "without an image it is impossible to think" (*On Memory* 450a1)—thought that the highest activity of the highest form of substance, sometimes also called "god," was thought thinking itself (*Metaphysics* 1075a7-10) and that those who would be philosophers ought to emulate that activity. With Aristotle, we can describe philosophy as a way of thinking about thinking. In *Was heisst Denken?* Martin Heidegger described such thinking as questioning and the goal of that questioning as understanding, *Verstand*.<sup>11</sup> For Heidegger, interpretation was already the highest form of philosophical thinking, and understanding was the form and content of that thinking. In *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari distinguish philosophy as the creation of concepts and declare that philosophers think with concepts while artists think with images.<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari maintain a distinction between philosophy and art, but do not think there is any difficulty about philosophy interpreting or thinking about art: philosophers think about art by creating concepts. In fact, Deleuze thinks that none of us really begins to think until all the ways we have become accustomed to thinking break down. He calls the "image of thought" precisely the unthinking supposition that we all know what to think and how to think and, so, never really get to thinking at all; when we do not think in this sense, we just rehearse the old saws.<sup>13</sup>

For an interpretation of Francis Bacon, to pick one example, Deleuze creates "the round form," "meat," and "the diagram,"<sup>14</sup> concepts drawn from the visible elements of Bacon's paintings that bring out otherwise invisible elements of the compositions. The round form, he says, is the common limit of the Figure or Figures we see in Bacon's paintings and the large fields they populate (13). The round form, Deleuze says, is a technique Bacon uses to isolate the Figure making it an Image (5-6). Thus isolated, the Figure escapes any figurative, illustrative, narrative, or, more generally, representational qualities that might be assigned it. At this level of abstraction, the Figure as Image becomes its body and the "meat" that sustains it. Where a face would return the Figure to the representation of a narrative, Deleuze says that Bacon "dismantles" the face to rediscover the head and the spirit which animates it, "spirit in a bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit" (19). Unlike Merleau-Ponty's flesh, meat does not solve the problem

of representation but exacerbates it; it forces us to think about thinking with images.

With the diagram, finally, Deleuze conceptualizes how Bacon erases, scrubs, or wipes out locales or zones of color to remove anything given in advance of the act of painting itself. Paint randomly applied and pushed around the canvas is worked to introduce both chaos, a “catastrophe,” but also “a germ of order or rhythm” (83). The diagram is deployed to keep the abstraction of the Figure from becoming stabilized as asceticism, on the one hand, or collapsing into sheer chaos, on the other. Drawing from the visible elements of Bacon’s paintings, Deleuze creates concepts that make the invisible elements—the Figure as Image, the spirit of meat, the meeting of chaos and consistency—visible, giving us something to think. Deleuze is not concerned with what exactly we think, just so long as we think, and we will be thinking, according to Deleuze, just insofar as we are not thinking what has always already been thought.<sup>15</sup>

In this way Deleuze differs from Foucault and aligns, ironically, and more closely, with Gracia. Foucault isolates visible elements of images and realigns them in ways that make otherwise invisible elements visible, revealing truths heretofore unthought in appreciations of these images. In his archaeologies, Foucault does not tell us what he is thinking nor does he reveal the hidden truth of what the image means. He rather organizes these visibilities, divides them, distributes them, arranges them in levels, establishes series, distinguishes what is and is not relevant in them, discovers elements, defines unities, describes their relations.<sup>16</sup> His aim is not to say what the work of art means but to work on it and develop it from within. Deleuze, by comparison, creates concepts from visible elements of images that no doubt complicate what we already think about them but that also direct us to what we might come to think about them. Deleuze wants us to think outside the image of thought which, for so long, he says, has kept us from thinking. The goal of Deleuze’s thinking about Bacon is to get us to think differently about philosophy itself.

Gracia’s motivations are very different. It goes back to the story at the beginning of his *Images of Thought*. It may very well be that Gracia wants to recreate that epiphany in the museum and his being induced to appreciate the philosophical value of what he had taken to be—because institutionally verified—the scribbles of a mad man. Can he do this for others? Can he bring their attention to the philosophical value of works of art? Is it too much for an interpretation to aim, “instrumentally,” at producing philosophical understandings in the audience for that interpretation (198)? Has he succeeded here?

There is no question that he has succeeded in bringing to our attention the value of Carlo Estévez’s art. In his new book, and in the handsome exhibit he has curated for the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Jorge Gracia has introduced us to the work of an accomplished and compelling artist. There is clearly something distinctive about the juxtaposition of color and line, the combining of human, animal, and mechanical forms, the images of emerging technologies and the imagination in Estévez’s art. There is also an obvious thoughtfulness to this art and a palpable playfulness in that thought. The project which has sent elaborately illustrated and annotated scrolls to the sea as just so many messages in a bottle exemplifies this thinking and the play of excess one finds in so many of Estévez’s images. Whether this quality of Estévez’s art is brought out by linking his images to what philosophers have perennially thought, I’m not certain. I am more inclined to wonder whether Estévez’s art doesn’t introduce us to what philosophers have not yet thought and to a conception of philosophy that positively and productively breaks with philosophy’s history.

Gracia would worry about how we can give a properly philosophical interpretation of a work of art without knowing in advance what is properly philosophical and an interpretation. I hope I have suggested, here, that there have been a number of different and successful philosophies and interpretations of art and that a properly philosophical interpretation would lead us to ever more philosophies and interpretations. I am not sure we interpret works of art to make others more philosophical, but I am convinced—and here, I believe, Gracia would agree—that we appreciate and interpret works of art to become better philosophers ourselves.

#### Endnotes

1. Jorge Gracia. *Images of Thought: Philosophical Interpretations of Carlos Estévez’s Art* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009).
2. Michel Foucault. *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
3. “Duane Michals met Magritte and loved him,” Foucault writes. Michel Foucault, “Thought and Emotion,” in Duane Michals: *Photographie de 1968 à 1982*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1982, unnumbered pages.
4. Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. uncredited (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 3-16. See also my “The Visible and the Invisible in Merleau-Ponty and Foucault,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 25.3 (1993): 35-46.
5. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); *Eye and Mind*, trans. Carleton Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited by James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-90, and “Cézanne’s Doubt” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Patricia A. Dreyfus and Herbert L. Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9-25.
6. Gracia titles his essays with what he says are well-known quotes from authors in the canon of philosophy (199). This title differs in that it is taken from an institutional academic structuring of the discipline of philosophy. Whether this is a clue to what Gracia takes to be appropriately philosophical could be the subject of yet another commentary on this book.
7. Compare the opening lines of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1976).
9. The allusion may be to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, of course, but also to Deleuze and Guattari’s “plane of immanence,” or just to a general sense that everywhere one finds iterations of what one finds everywhere else: the transcendental unity of apperception, Geist, capital, the will to power; the unconscious, etc. If Gracia wants to insist that it’s identities that the central figure juggles, maybe those identities are more akin to what Paul Miller calls the “multi-plex consciousness,” an advanced stage of what W. E. B. DuBois referred to as “double consciousness.” Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 61.
10. Svetlana Alpers. *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 248 n. 68. See also Svetlana Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation, or: The Viewing of *Las Meninas*,” *Representations* 1 (Feb. 1983): 30-42; John Searle, “*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (Spring 1980): 477-88; Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, “Reflections on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980): 429-47; and Leo Steinberg, “Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*,” October 15 (1981): 45-54.
11. Martin Heidegger. *Was heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1961), translated by J. Glenn Gray as *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).



12. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
13. Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 129-67.
14. Gilles Deleuze. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
15. And lest we think that this discussion is besides the point of his argument, Gracia not only bibliographs Deleuze's study of Bacon but quotes from it in support of that argument (3).
16. Compare Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 6-7.

art is to keep in mind both the kind of philosophical interpretation in question and what the art is about. (Gracia, xiii)

Gracia constructs his argument in such a way that Parts I and II are deeply interrelated in the sense that Part I consisting of philosophical interpretations of Estévez's art serves to strengthen the claim made in Part II regarding the possibility of philosophical interpretations of art and provides illustrations of such interpretations, while Part II provides the theoretical analysis of the concepts at play in Part I. Finally, for Gracia both Parts I and II support the claim that philosophy and art consisting of visual imagery are compatible and despite their differences can communicate with each other. A correct understanding of the nature of interpretation and its relation to philosophy and art is the key to eliminating the view that art and philosophy are embattled adversaries.

Let us then first get an understanding of what Gracia means by both meaning philosophical interpretation and relational philosophical interpretation and how he applies these concepts to an object of art. Here I will confine my discussion to Gracia's account of philosophical interpretations of art. I will mention in passing that I have questions about Gracia's understanding of the philosophical enterprise in so far as thinkers such as Nietzsche and Derrida are considered philosophers, and about Gracia's claim that "much contemporary art" is "shocking, ugly, and even repugnant" (Gracia, 15). While the former would push for a lengthy, elaborate discussion of the troublesome question of the meaning of philosophy and of the place of the so-called critics of philosophy, the latter would entail a discussion of the meaning of beauty in general and in specific works of art—obviously both subjects are well beyond the scope of my discussion.

Given the relationship between a philosophical interpretation of art and art objects, either as meaning philosophical interpretations (MPI) or relational philosophical interpretations (RPI), Gracia has to define what an art object is. For him, an art object is (1) an artifact—a product of intentional design—and (2) is capable of producing an aesthetic experience (someone regards it as an artifact capable of producing an aesthetic experience). Gracia's definition can be understood as a functionalist definition in so far as that which makes an object an art object is its function of producing an aesthetic experience (or if someone believes that the object has that function). Carlos Estévez's works satisfies both conditions: they are artifacts and they are capable of producing an aesthetic experience (at least for Gracia). What would constitute a philosophical interpretation of such works then? What Gracia calls a Meaning Philosophical Interpretation or MPI is one that aims at clarifying and making explicit philosophy in the object of interpretation. It provides a philosophical understanding of the meaning of an object of interpretation (here meaning can be determined or not by an author and an audience), including its implications. A Meaning Philosophical Interpretation can also be instrumental; it can be an object that helps to produce understanding of the philosophical meaning of the object in question, such as a text. So Gracia explains that an MPI of Aristotle's sentence, "All men by nature desire to know" is one that attempts to explain the meaning expressed by that sentence. An MPI of a literary work such as Borges' "Pierre Menard" or "The Circular Ruins" is one that attempts to understand or to produce an object that helps in the understanding of the philosophy in Borges' stories. An MPI of visual art such as a work by Estévez, which is the object of Gracia's concern, is one that tries to understand or to produce an object that helps in the understanding of the philosophy in Estévez's work. And, as stated before, according to Gracia, the only art objects that can be the subject of an MPI are art

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## ***A Philosophical Hermeneutics of Visual Art: On Gracia's Images of Thought, Philosophical Interpretations of Carlos Estévez's Art***

**Mariana Ortega**

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In his musings on the relationship between philosophy and literature, Italo Calvino describes philosophers as eliminating the flesh out of the world, reducing everything to a spider's web of relationships between general ideas, while he describes writers as replacing the abstract with fleshed bodies in dusty battlefields or stormy seas.<sup>1</sup> Like Calvino, Gracia, in his *Images of Thought, Philosophical Interpretations of Carlos Estévez's Art*, is interested in revisiting the long-standing battle between philosophy and another alleged adversary of philosophy, art.<sup>2</sup> Given the numerous differences between the two contestants in terms of media, means, ends, and practitioners, Gracia asks, "are art and philosophy diametrically opposed enterprises, in which communication is impossible?" (Gracia, xiii). Visual art, according to Gracia, presents us with special difficulties given that it is primarily comprised of images and not of texts as philosophical writings are and thus in his analysis Gracia concentrates on such art.

It does not come as a surprise that, according to Gracia, the relationship between art and philosophy is not antithetical—but this is hardly news as numerous theorists and artists have written and argued about the different ways in which art and philosophy are intertwined. The question that seems to motivate him more is not whether art and philosophy can communicate with each other—although he is clearly deeply concerned about this issue—but whether there can be legitimate philosophical interpretations of art or whether philosophical interpretations of art make sense (Gracia, 195). Again, not surprisingly, the answer for Gracia is that indeed there can be philosophical interpretations of art. In fact, Part I of the book (what can be called an exercise of philosophy in art) is comprised of philosophical interpretations of Carlos Estévez's art. Part II of the book (what can be seen as an analysis of philosophy of art) is a theoretical analysis of just what a philosophical interpretation of art entails, namely, a meaning philosophical interpretation (MPI) for works of art that are philosophical and a relational philosophical interpretation (RPI) for works of art that are not philosophical. As Gracia says,

Art that is not concerned with philosophy can only successfully be interpreted philosophically in relational terms, whereas art that is philosophical can be successfully interpreted in non-relational terms. The key to understanding philosophical interpretations of

objects that are philosophical. For Gracia, Estévez's work is philosophical. He makes this conclusion because of the artist's own description of his works, the titles of the works as well as "the configuration of the art" (Gracia, 199). I will return to this point later.

However, the philosophy in an art object may not be obvious or explicit in such an object. Then, according to Gracia, the only acceptable philosophical interpretation of such an object is relational. The relational philosophical interpretation (RPI) aims at understanding the relation of an object of interpretation or its meaning to philosophy. Just like meaning philosophical interpretations, relational philosophical interpretations can be instrumental; they can help us produce an object which will aid in understanding of the relation of an object of interpretation or its meaning to philosophy. Thus, for Gracia, the main concern with relational philosophical interpretations is not philosophical meaning but an understanding of the relation of the object or its meaning to a philosophical position. Examples of these interpretations are Gracia's own philosophical interpretations of Estévez's works (although he is mindful of meaning philosophical interpretations of Estévez's work wherever possible); for example, Gracia's interpretation of "Self-Fishing" attempts to provide an understanding of the relation of the content of the work to the philosophical problem about knowledge acquisition between internalists and externalists; his interpretation of "Walking Universe" provides an account of how the work portrays the ancient view of the human being as a microcosm of the larger universe (an interpretation I particularly liked); and his interpretation of "Difficult loves" relates the work to the metaphysics of race.

Gracia's own texts are supposed to help us understand the relation of the work to the philosophical issue at hand. For example, in Part I Gracia offers interpretations of Estévez's art in terms of questions of knowledge, reality, society, and destiny. In the end, according to Gracia, such relational philosophical interpretations aim at producing a philosophical understanding in the readers. Estévez's works are not to be seen as illustrations of philosophical ideas but as sources for philosophical understanding and speculation. Philosophers can start or continue exploring that vast openness which Gracia's conception of philosophical interpretation of art offers. No longer should philosophers be afraid of being told that they are providing illegitimate or abusive interpretations of artworks. We (philosophers, art critics, etc.) need to hold on to the distinction between meaning philosophical interpretations and relational philosophical interpretations and their specific aims. All art can be the subject of relational philosophical interpretations and only philosophical art is the subject of meaning philosophical interpretations.

While I recognize the importance of the implications that Gracia's theory of philosophical interpretations of art offers for philosophers like me who appreciate art, who do not want to see art and philosophy as antithetical, and who actually want to explore further the intertwining of these two beautiful contenders, I still have some worries/questions regarding (A) Gracia's definition of art, (B) the nature and evaluation of meaning philosophical interpretations, and (C) the circular nature of the enterprise.

### A. Definition of an art object

Recall that Gracia's definition of an object of art has the following conditions: (1) the object has to be an artifact, and (2) the object has to be capable of producing an aesthetic experience (or somebody thinks of the object as capable of producing such an experience). I agree that the functionalist aspect of the definition is important. It makes sense that a key factor for an object to be an art object is that it is capable of

producing an aesthetic experience. However, should other criteria be included? Are there other factors that have to be taken into account in considering whether an object is an art object, such as specific features or properties that the object may have for it to be able to produce an aesthetic experience or perhaps the context, historical or cultural, in which the object is to be placed?

Concentrating on the object's function seems to allow for room for too many artifacts to be art objects—someone could get an aesthetic experience from some artifact in the world designed to produce an aesthetic experience but that is not regarded as art (i.e., beautifully designed Apple computer, beautifully designed car). Yet, it seems that Gracia's own experience of Estévez's work as always having an aesthetic dimension "that is engaging and often appealing, and is frequently captivatingly beautiful" (Gracia, 16) and his claim about most contemporary art being ugly, shocking, and repugnant (Gracia, 15) suggest that he would not think of all artifacts as being capable of being art objects and definitely not beautiful art objects.

At the same time that this functionalist definition of the art object would allow for certain artifacts that are not generally recognized as art to count as art objects, it does not seem to allow other artifacts that are recognized as art, such as Duchamp's urinal and Warhol's Brillo Box to be considered art objects (because they are not meant to produce an aesthetic experience)—but I suspect that this is not an issue for Gracia, although the larger issue of what counts as an aesthetic experience remains. Moreover, Gracia finds it of great importance that Estévez's works deal with universal images and themes and he says that his works are often beautiful. What is the role of universal images and themes in his vision of an art object, of a beautiful art object? And why is it that, according to Gracia, Estévez's works are beautiful...any other reason besides their function of producing an aesthetic experience? Is Gracia's functionalist definition doing not just classifying art objects but also evaluating them? But I recognize that I am moving beyond the scope of my discussion here. My point is whether or not Gracia would be better off providing a definition that goes beyond the criterion of functionality.<sup>3</sup>

### B. On the nature and evaluation of meaning philosophical interpretations

As noted above, meaning philosophical interpretations can only be given of works that are philosophical. Separating philosophical interpretations into meaning philosophical interpretations and relational philosophical interpretations is clearly an effective tool if we are to understand the different ways in which one could provide a philosophical interpretation that is not seen as abusive or illegitimate. I cannot be criticized for not providing the correct philosophical meaning of a work of art if I am only providing an account of the relation between the object (or its meaning) to some philosophical view that I am interested in, whether it is medieval philosophy or existentialism. Yet, I wonder what it means to say that a meaning philosophical interpretation is successful, that it provides a successful explanation of the philosophical meaning of the object of art? I would like to hear more from Gracia about this issue. The reason I ask is that the differences mentioned by Gracia between philosophy and art (media, means, end, and practitioners) remain, so how is the interpreter going to translate the philosophy in the object of art into his interpretative text? How is one successfully going to read the visual imagery representative of philosophical ideas into philosophical ideas? For example, let us take "Walking Universe," which seems to be a good candidate for a meaning philosophical interpretation, given its title and the artist's interest in the history of philosophy.

How does the interpreter successfully read the visual imagery of the female figure, her clothing, the elements within her body, the mechanical elements portrayed in the painting to show philosophical meaning in the painting? My point is not that one cannot do it, but I wonder what it means to do it successfully. Has Gracia successfully interpreted the meaning of the imagery of the figure's dress as the dichotomy between nature and culture (Gracia, 86)?

As mentioned above, Gracia judges Estévez's works as being philosophical due to the artist's own comments, the titles of the works, and the "configuration" of the works. What does Gracia mean by a philosophical "configuration"? How is he able to understand successfully the philosophy in a configuration of images? Having the artist's comments about philosophy is clearly helpful, but can one discern the philosophical without them? Obviously, this would not be a great issue because we could simply say that whenever we are in doubt about the philosophical nature of a work of art, we can simply perform relational philosophical interpretations of such works, which are still enlightening and even fun, as Gracia claims about his interpretations of Estévez's works. Yet, I mention the issue because at one point in the text Gracia says that his view "allows us to formulate better criteria for judging the value of philosophical interpretations of art" (Gracia, 196), so I am led to question how we are to evaluate meaning philosophical interpretations, given the philosophical desire for accuracy, consistency, and comprehensiveness (and even relational philosophical interpretations given the many possibilities of interpretation that are opened up—for example, is Gracia successful in evaluating "Difficult Loves" by relating it to the metaphysics of race [Gracia, 99-103]?).

### C. Circularity of the enterprise

As already noted, Part I and Part II of Gracia's book are related. In Part I, Gracia offers philosophical interpretations of Estévez's work and Part II supports the enterprise carried out in Part I. Both Parts I and II strengthen the view that philosophy and art can communicate. In a sense, Gracia's enterprise is a good example of what Heidegger calls the fore-structures of an interpretation, of the fact that interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Gracia's philosophical interpretations of the artworks are already informed by Gracia's own sense of the answer to the question of whether philosophy and art can communicate. In this sense his account is circular. It is also circular in the sense that the type of philosophy that Gracia finds in Estévez's work is related to the kinds of philosophical subjects that he is interested in such as metaphysics, existentialism, the problem of identity, etc. This circularity is not vicious; in fact, it is all that we have when we are faced with interpretations of texts, art objects, etc.; it is part and parcel of the hermeneutic enterprise. This point should help us understand his interpretations of Estévez's works not as proof of the link between philosophy and art but as hermeneutical exercises that illuminate the relationship between philosophy and art, between Gracia's own understanding of and interest in philosophy and Estévez's art.

However, another way in which the work is circular seems more problematic. As stated above, one needs to understand a work of art as philosophical in order to provide a meaning philosophical interpretation of it, but rather than showing the philosophical meaning of the work, one assumes it already and makes it explicit in the interpretation. As noted above, understanding the philosophical in images might be a problem itself, but if one claims to have understood it, isn't the meaning philosophical interpretation (assuming that it is not merely instrumental) nothing more than making explicit what one already understands as philosophical in the work of art? If so,

what is the value of meaning philosophical interpretations when we have other texts, namely, philosophical texts that already discuss the various philosophical issues (regardless of the kinds of philosophy) in much more depth and detail? This is not to suggest that artists should stick to art and philosophers to philosophy but to question the helpfulness of meaning philosophical interpretations of art objects.

Relational philosophical interpretations of art seem to lead to richer possibilities. In offering an account of such interpretations, Gracia is opening up the space of possibilities for philosophers (notorious for either forgetting or dismissing art) to engage with art, to learn to read it even if only within the narrow focus of their discipline. In other words, Gracia is doing a great service to philosophy and philosophers, but we might still wonder whether a great service is being done to art as such a position might give rise to numerous philosophical interpretations of art that even though could be enlightening could also run the risk of confining the fluidity and the expressiveness of a work of art to the narrow parameters of a discipline that a great number of practitioners interpret as the search for truth and consistency. While Gracia's theory of philosophical interpretation indeed gives us room to play by way of relational philosophical interpretations, I cannot help but recall Sontag's words, expressed a while ago but still relevant today:

Once upon a time (a time when high art was scarce), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art. Now it is not. What we decidedly do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture. ...Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, despite the importance of meaning philosophical interpretations and relational philosophical interpretations of art and the way they can enhance our understanding of both philosophy and art, let us not forget about an "erotics of art." Unlike Sontag, I do not ask that a hermeneutics of art be replaced with an erotics of art. I thank Gracia for facilitating the task of a philosophical hermeneutics of art and for opening up the beautiful laboratory of Estévez's art so as to help us understand the relationship between philosophy and art and to help us follow the ancient, overused, but profoundly indispensable dictum to "know ourselves."

### Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Eduardo Mendieta for inviting me to participate in the 2009 Eastern American Philosophical Association session on Gracia's work. I would also like to thank Jorge Gracia for our interesting, lively discussion on matters of art and philosophy, two subjects that I love.

### Endnotes

1. Italo Calvino. *The Uses of Literature* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1982), 39.
2. Jorge Gracia. *Images of Thought: Philosophical Interpretations of Carlos Estévez's Art* (New York: SUNY, 2009).
3. I should point out here that I am not trying to push Gracia into providing a so-called "conventionalist" definition of an art object. Rather, I am suggesting that Gracia is trying to do too much with the definition he provides and thus he needs to go further than just emphasizing the factor of functionality.
4. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie & Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 140.
5. Susan Sontag. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1966), 13-23.

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## ***The Philosophical Interpretation of Visual Art: Response to Mariana Ortega and John Carvalho***

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Let me begin by thanking Mariana Ortega and John Carvalho not only for the time they have taken in preparing their comments on my book, *Images of Thought: Philosophical Interpretations of Carlos Estévez's Art*, and for the care, objectivity, and generosity of their comments, but, most of all, for raising substantive issues that have allowed me to go beyond the book and explore further ideas which I had not developed fully. They have opened avenues of reflection that are interesting and profitable, and they have challenged some of my views vigorously. No philosopher can ask for a better response. Unfortunately, in my reply I can only address a few of the many points they raise.

### **I. Visual Art and Its Philosophical Interpretation: Response to Ortega**

Ortega focuses on three issues in particular: the definition of an art object, the nature and evaluation of what I call in the book "meaning philosophical interpretations," and a possible circularity inherent in the view of philosophical interpretations of art I propose. I have something to say about each of these topics.

#### **A. Definition of Art Object**

The first issue concerns what Ortega correctly characterizes as my functionalist understanding of art, in which an art object is conceived as an artifact "capable of producing an aesthetic (sic) experience." The worry with this understanding of art, in her view, is that it appears to be both too narrow and too broad. It is too narrow because it does not seem to allow for such artifacts as Duchamp's urinal and Warhol's Brillo Box to be considered art objects, whereas in fact they are. And my view is too broad in that it extends the designation of art to objects that are not generally accepted as art, such as a beautifully designed Apple computer or a beautifully designed car. According to Ortega, this indicates that I need to add something more to my understanding of the conditions that apply to art objects so that the category does not include objects that are not considered to be art or exclude objects that are considered to be art.

The point Ortega brings up is one that I cannot avoid addressing if my view is to have any credibility insofar as I explicitly note in the book that I accept that such things as "chairs, tables, and piles of brick" can be considered art objects. Indeed, I refer explicitly to Marcel Duchamp's "urinals, wine-bottle racks, and other ready-mades" as examples. And I also explicitly note that I want to exclude all sorts of things from the category of art object. I certainly do not want to say that a sunset is an art object or that the pair of pants I am now wearing is an art object. So the question is: Does my conception of art object allow the inclusion of what we both agree are art objects and the exclusion of what we both agree are not art objects?

My answer is that it does because the definition of art object I propose is presented in terms of the notion of artistic experience as follows: An art object is an object capable of producing an artistic experience, and an object is capable of producing an artistic experience just when it is regarded by someone both as an artifact and as capable of producing an aesthetic experience. I further explain that to be an artifact requires intention and design. To be an art object, then, requires being the product of intentional activity and design. A sunset

is excluded from the category of art object because it is not an artifact, and the pair of pants I am wearing is excluded because no one today thinks of my pants as an object capable of producing an aesthetic experience. Of course, if I took a photo of the sunset and framed it, then it would probably count as an art object, and if I were Marcel Duchamp and took off my pants and hung them on a rack and displayed them in my studio, I would have de facto considered them capable of producing an aesthetic experience, and therefore they would become an art object.

Note an important point here: an aesthetic experience does not necessarily have to do with beauty or delight; it can involve fear and horror, as well as many other things. Philosophers of art have for long disagreed about what constitutes an aesthetic experience, and I stay out of the controversy in the book, although for my limited purposes I need to use a broad conception of the aesthetic. Indeed, I also want to allow for historical changes in what qualifies as aesthetic, so that, for example, I can account for a Brillo box being art at the end of the twentieth century but not at its beginning. This is why a functionalist interpretation of art is important, for it is tied to a historical audience, and not based on audience-independent criteria. This explains why a urinal could never have been an art object two hundred years ago—I am not sure whether urinals even existed then, but let us assume they did—while some urinals are considered art objects today, although not the one in the men's room around the corner.

In short, I think that my understanding of art is both sufficiently narrow and sufficiently broad for the purposes I had in mind in *Images of Thought* and should assuage the first concern voiced by Ortega. But, of course, it calls for further discussion of the nature of aesthetic experience. Unfortunately, this is a topic that I cannot discuss presently with any degree of adequacy and will have to be left for another occasion. Now let me turn to the second area that worries her:

#### **B. Nature and Evaluation of Meaning Philosophical Interpretations**

This has to do with the gap between a work of art and a philosophical interpretation of it and the challenge of determining the success of the interpretation. Ortega focuses first on meaning interpretations rather than relational ones by asking how we can tell that a meaning philosophical interpretation does justice to a work of art. But later she brings up relational philosophical interpretations as well, because these also are subject to value judgments, and thus we are entitled to ask for the grounds on which their value can be determined. The general issue Ortega raises can be formulated in two questions: First, how can philosophical interpretations of art take place when there is such a large gap between art and philosophy? and, second, how can their success be measured?

Let me turn first to relational philosophical interpretations. These are interpretations in which an interpreter is interested in understanding a relation between a work of art and, say, a philosophical theory, view, or argument. So let us ask, first, how these relational interpretations are possible? Perhaps the best way of answering this question is to give an example, such as my interpretation of Estévez's *Difficult Loves*, where I explore the relation between the work and contemporary racial theory and to which Ortega refers. The work consists of two images that face each other: One is an image of a multicolored moth that looks anatomically correct. The other is the image of a model of a white colored glider designed by Otto Lilienthal. In contemporary race theory there are many issues that come up regularly and over which there is considerable disagreement, so I try to see if the painting can be effectively related to some

of these issues. For example, one of the issues frequently discussed is whether race in general or particular races are natural or artificial. So, my interpretation proposes to take the white glider as symbolizing the artifactual character of the white race. Moreover, the contrast of the artifactual glider with the natural multicolored moth suggests that nature is multicolored and that whiteness, and perhaps all races, are human constructions. These and other reflections vouch for the possibility of relational philosophical interpretations of art.

Now, let me turn to the second question, concerned with how the success of relational philosophical interpretations may be measured. So let us see how this can be done in the case of my interpretation of *Difficult Loves*. The answer is that the ground for evaluating success is the satisfaction of the end pursued. Just like an action of raising a glass to drink water is valuable insofar as it makes it possible for me to drink the water, a relational philosophical interpretation of *Difficult Loves* will be valuable to the extent that it fulfills its aim, which is an understanding of the relation of the art work to some aspect of the philosophy of race. But because relations involve both the relata, which in this case are the art object and philosophy, as well as the relation, conditions coming from all three apply.

From the side of philosophy, the conditions involve the general requirements that apply to the discipline, such as coherence, for example. It would make no sense to provide a philosophical interpretation on the basis of race theory of *Difficult Loves* that consists in an incoherent understanding. From the side of the work of art, the conditions include the integrity of the work. It would not do to neglect aspects of the work that are essential parts of it. For example, an interpretation that fails to make a reference to the color of the two moths or the fact that one looks like an artifact and the other like a natural bug, would not do. Finally, there are conditions that come from the relation itself. A good interpretation will try to find correlates between the art and the philosophy. It makes sense to make something of the color in our example, because we find the notion of color in the theory of race and because color is a prominent element in the work of art. Does it make sense to pay attention to the number of legs of the multicolored moth? Probably not, because there does not seem to be a corresponding element in the theory of race. I return to this point later, in my response to Carvalho.

These are some of the bases on which the value of a relational philosophical interpretation of a work of art can be judged. But this is not all. At least one other condition is significant, namely, the possibility that elements in the picture will bring out philosophical connections and ideas that may not have been obvious, or that may be completely absent in the philosophy. Consider, for example, the position of confrontation coupled with the title of the art piece. These suggest a relation between races that can be further explored. Perhaps the white moth is the projection of the thought of the colored one, for example. This adds to the value of the piece.

Now, as far as a relational philosophical interpretation goes, the interpreter is not trying to reveal the philosophy in the work of art, but merely relating it to philosophy. But what do we make of art pieces that seem to be philosophical? In these cases I claimed in the book that the interpreter needs to understand the philosophy in them, that is, he or she needs to provide a meaning philosophical interpretation. So let's go back to the first question we raised and apply it to these interpretations: How are meaning philosophical interpretations of art possible?

I am sympathetic with Ortega's concerns about this question, and it may be that meaning philosophical interpretations of art are not possible, and all philosophical interpretations of art turn

out to be relational. While writing the book I thought about this, and in the end decided that it would be better to allow for the possibility of meaning philosophical interpretations of art for various reasons. One is that there are examples of art that appear to support it. Consider the well-known painting by Raphael, *School of Athens*. The first clue we have as to its philosophical content is in the very title of the piece, for "*School of Athens*" is a common name used to refer to ancient Athenian philosophers. And, indeed, the painting presents us with a congregation of philosophers in Athens that we recognize from the way they are portrayed and the focal point of their philosophies by their gestures. On one side is Aristotle, indicating his preference for a philosophy grounded in empirical experience by pointing to the ground, and on the other is Plato, whose pointing toward heaven indicates his preference for the ideal world of forms.

If we turn to the work of Estévez, we find some similarities. Consider, for example, the work *The Doctrine of Predestination*, which, as its title suggests, is about a theological doctrine with heavy philosophical overtones. The work depicts a game of dominoes, puppets with strings disappearing in the upper part of the work, and players holding pieces. Where is the philosophy in it? This is a matter of speculation. We need to begin with the title, and then look for clues that may reveal a philosophical position or a view concordant with the title. If, instead of puppets, Estévez had painted naturally looking people, lounging around a swimming pool, it would be very difficult, and perhaps impossible cogently, to interpret the painting as suggesting that humans are manipulated by a divinity, or that a divinity has predestined them.

The use of puppets tied to strings that disappear at the top of the picture and the interpretation of them I have just given points to the ways artists and interpreters communicate with each other, that is, the ways in which artists seek to communicate with audiences and the ways audiences read images. In figurative art in particular, this works often through the use of cultural symbols whose meanings are common to the artist and the interpreter. For example, trains and other means of transportation are used to signify a journey; a dove for peace and a lion for strength; a scale may bring up justice; chains mean incarceration and bondage; light is related to understanding facial expressions are taken as clues to mental states; a smile indicates happiness; closed eyes on a relaxed face suggest contentment and peace of mind; and a furrowed brow recalls preoccupation or anger. Even colors have symbolic meanings: red is associated with blood and crimes; green with vegetation and nature; and blue with water and the sky. We are surrounded by images that we have learned to use to communicate and that function as clues to reveal what otherwise appears inscrutable. Art objects are cultural objects intentionally created and designed by artists to function in certain ways and symbols help reveal their content.

Still, this does not answer the second question raised above, namely, how we can measure success in meaning philosophical interpretations? How do I know that a particular interpretation of this sort is good or bad? For it is clear that the procedures to which I have referred are flexible insofar as symbols, and even titles, can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Can we ever tell whether a meaning philosophical interpretation is inappropriate, or even false? I think that to look for an exact judgment in this matter is a mistake, precisely because symbols function through allusion and suggestion. They are not linguistic terms that have fixed usages, and they do not constitute a language with strict syntactical rules. We can tell that a sentence like: "Table is cat" is nonsensical because it violates the logical rules of the language it uses. But this is

not the case with images in art. There is no logic that rules out any artistic depiction as absurd because, like the case in which language is used metaphorically, symbols in a work of art do not have to adhere to the rules of a language. So what can we say about the value of meaning philosophical interpretations?

One thing we can say is that the value depends on whether the interpretation does justice to as many elements of the art work as possible. And since the interpretations we have in mind are philosophical, they should adhere to the rules that govern philosophy. But then the question arises as to philosophy in what sense and according to whose understanding of it? Philosophy as understood by Carnap or philosophy as understood by Derrida, a point Ortega raises? As you would expect, I do have a view of philosophy, which I use in the book because I need to use something if I am going to talk about philosophy at all. But whether we use my view or not, to answer this question does not affect the hermeneutic point I am making. Regardless of the conception of philosophy adopted, one can impose certain conditions on interpretations, so that their success will depend on the criteria used, although there are some criteria that apply across the board, such as relevance, coherence, and richness. The elements of the art must be relevant philosophically, the outcome must be coherent, and the interpretation must be as rich as possible. Other criteria apply only when particular conceptions of philosophy are used, such as an Aristotelian or a Kantian. Finally, let me make clear that this does not turn meaning philosophical interpretations into relational philosophical interpretations. For the former claim to be understandings of art works, rather than understandings of how art works are related to philosophical theories or ideas.

### C. Circularity Inherent in the Philosophical Interpretation of Art

As a third area of concern, Ortega raises some questions related to circularity and the Heideggerian claim that all interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance. This circularity, according to her, manifests itself first in that my philosophical interpretations of art works “are already informed by [my own] sense of the answer to the question of whether philosophy and art can communicate.” And, second, it manifests itself in that my interpretations are related to the kinds of philosophical subjects that interest me. She finds neither of these troubling—unlike Carvalho, who does, as we shall see later—because I do not present my interpretations as proofs of a link between art and philosophy, but “as hermeneutical exercises that illuminate the relationship between philosophy and art.” Although I do not concur with the judgment of circularity, I leave this matter aside because Ortega does not find it troublesome. However, Ortega goes on to find two troublesome difficulties, which I need to address. The first concerns meaning philosophical interpretations and the second relational philosophical interpretations. Both have to do with the value of these interpretations.

In the case of meaning philosophical interpretations, she questions their value insofar as these interpretations presumably do nothing more than make explicit the philosophy in the art, which again is presumably nothing more than what I already think or is available in philosophical texts. What is the value of the interpretations then?

In the case of relational philosophical interpretations the question is whether there is any value for art in this hermeneutic enterprise. Can art gain anything from them in spite of the fact that these interpretations run the risk of restricting “the fluidity and the expressiveness of a work of art to the narrow parameters of a discipline that a great number of practitioners interpret as the search for truth and consistency”? Indeed, shouldn't we heed Sontag's admonition “not...to assimilate

Art into Thought...” but rather consider “our task...to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all”?

I propose two responses to this difficulty. One takes for granted the premise on which both points raised by Ortega are based, namely, that if there is any value involved in philosophical interpretations of art, the value must be measured in terms of the benefits they provide for art. So the question turns then on what art can gain from philosophy. Should we leave art uncontaminated with philosophy, so that we can, as Sontag admonishes us, see the thing? Sontag and Ortega are right to this extent: If the purpose of a philosophical interpretation of art is to reduce art to philosophy, and therefore eliminate art, then clearly there is no benefit that art can derive from the interpretation for in becoming philosophy, art ceases to be art. But this assumes that in fact art can be effectively reduced to philosophy, a point which cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, one can find many reasons why this reduction cannot be effective. No matter how conceptual art becomes, there are radical differences between a work of art and a philosophical view, so that there can be no effective reduction of the first to the second. This is not the place to get involved in the thorny issue of the ontology of art objects and philosophy, but even a superficial analysis of it should reveal important differences between art objects and philosophy. And if reduction of art to philosophy is impossible, then the question remains as to what art can gain from its philosophical interpretation.

There are several ways in which philosophical interpretations may benefit art, but let me mention one that is particularly telling: enrichment. And here I want to make clear that I am taking for granted that the meaning of a work of art, even of works that have a philosophical content, is not exhausted by their philosophical content. Estévez's *The Doctrine of Predestination* cannot be reduced to the philosophical doctrine of predestination. The reason is that the doctrine of predestination is a view which consists of various claims, and the work of art is rather an artifact consisting of canvas and paint organized into images. So it is impossible to reduce the meaning of the work, which includes physical characteristics such as colors and shapes, to a philosophical doctrine which is something nonphysical. Nor could one seriously suggest that one corresponds to the other: The philosophy in the work of art can only be considered a part of the meaning of the work, not all of it.

This brings us back to the value of meaning philosophical interpretations for art. In one sense, meaning philosophical interpretations make explicit, in a different medium if you will, something implicit in the art work. It converts into a text what is partly embedded and hidden in the images of the work of art, and this enriches our understanding of the work. However, this revelation, if we may call it so, is not all that the interpretation does. By making explicit the philosophical part of the meaning of the work, the interpretation opens avenues of understanding of it that may have been otherwise inaccessible. So we may understand, for example, how the philosophical meaning of the work is related to its visual meaning or to the medium used, or to a psychological dimension of the work, and so on. My philosophical discussion of the doctrine of predestination in Estévez's piece brings to the fore, for example, that the ultimate destiny of humans may be in part controlled by a divinity through a reference to the puppets in the work and the lines that seem to control them, while the fact that the source of that control remains hidden raises questions as to its nature. And this, again, enriches the art work.

One frequently touted contemporary criterion for the value of interpretations of art is that an interpretation that enhances the value of a work is better than one that does not. And this

surely applies to philosophical interpretations both because they make explicit something that may not have been so, and also because they open further avenues of appreciation for the work based on the relation between this part of its meaning to other parts of it.

But there is another way of responding to Ortega's third concern. And this is by rejecting off hand the assumption that the value of philosophical interpretations of art is to be measured by the benefit that they provide for art, and arguing instead that this value is to be measured by the benefit that they provide for humans. This, I think, is the most interesting response, because it is based on the claim that art and philosophy are human enterprises that are not valuable in themselves, but valuable only insofar as they reach the aims for which humans have developed them. The worth of philosophy consists in the benefit it provides for humans and the same is true of art. Art and philosophy have been developed by humans to aid in understanding—when understanding is conceived broadly—us and the world in which we live. The idea that art and philosophy are goods in themselves makes very little sense. As Aristotle says at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, it is human to be curious, and one of the aims of art, just as of philosophy, is to satisfy that curiosity. So why are philosophical interpretations of art valuable? Not so much, as I argued before, because they enrich art, but, most important, because they satisfy our curiosity by filling in a gap in our understanding of the world. In philosophical interpretations of art, we understand something that neither philosophy by itself nor art by itself does. In relational philosophical interpretations we get to understand a relation which goes beyond the understanding of the relation, for it is one thing to understand the relation between art and philosophy and another to understand art and philosophy. But even in meaning interpretations, we understand something that is rather fascinating, namely, two different ways of approaching the same thing. It is as if we were looking at a coin from two different sides. Meaning philosophical interpretations reveal to us the philosophy in the art, and this without actually obliterating what is characteristic of the art. Colors and images are not eliminated when a philosophical interpretation of art is given, rather they are understood in relation to ideas, and hence enriched.

But we may want to go further and ask why this satisfies human curiosity and interest. The answer is that it responds to what and who we are. Humans are not disembodied minds or bodies without minds. It is essential to the notion of person, as Strawson argued some years ago, to be both bodies and minds, regardless of how ultimately one interprets metaphysically these two aspects of human beings. And art and philosophy in many ways speak to these two aspects of our humanity. We sense and we think, and so it is only natural that we want to know how to bring together these two dimensions of our being. Art responds to one, philosophy responds to the other, and the philosophical interpretation of art shows how art speaks to philosophy. Now let me turn to Carvalho.

## **II. Art, Philosophy, and Foucault's Interpretation of *Las Meninas*: Response to John Carvalho**

Carvalho's primary concern in his remarks has to do with what is a central preoccupation in *Images of Thought*: the legitimacy and value of the interpretations of the art of Carlos Estévez I provide and about the lessons that we can learn about the philosophical interpretation of art based on them. His judgment is that my interpretations, although varying in value, could have gone beyond their present limits and that this would have benefited them. The problems that put their value into question, making them fall short of what, as philosophical interpretations, they could have been, are at least three. The first is that they are

forced insofar as they are presented from an already established philosophy or philosophical point of view. The second is that they sometimes ignore elements in the images of the art works they interpret in order to get to the philosophy that I bring into the interpretation. And the third is that this procedure assumes too much about philosophy and its history. Clearly, if Carvalho is right, the interpretations I present are questionable and, what is more important, they are so because either they do something that philosophical interpretations of art should avoid doing or do not do something that they should do.

The first and second criticisms I think can be summarized by characterizing them as Procrustean, a characterization that Carvalho does not use probably because he is too kind. But let me just be blunt about it and use this metaphor because it gives a sense of what he may have in mind. The point is that I lay Estévez's paintings on a philosophical bed of my making, stretching them beyond what is appropriate, and even cutting off whatever does not fit into the bed.

Carvalho finds in my interpretation of *The Juggler* a good example to illustrate what can be wrong with my interpretations. One telling point is that I leave out of consideration some aspects of the picture. He points out two in particular: One is the lines that go from various parts of the body of the puppet that is the central figure in the work to the upper part of the picture, and the other is the lines that go from a dot in the area of the heart of the central figure to the various other puppets that the central puppet appears to juggle.

Carvalho substantiates the importance of these lines by suggesting that they could open interesting avenues of interpretation. For example, one could speculate about the possibility that the smaller figures would have themselves even smaller figures they juggle, and that the main figure could be one of the figures that an even larger figure would itself juggle. The result is that, instead of one figure juggling others, we would have an infinite number of figures, going in two opposite directions.

Now, let me say in passing that, although Carvalho's suggested interpretation is intriguing, I do not think it works for this painting. One reason is that for it to work, it would require that we see parts of the images of other figures in the painting, both greater and smaller than the ones currently in the picture, insofar as the figures in the work are very close together and even overlap. So if the scheme of the juggler were to be repeated both below and above, as Carvalho's interpretation posits, we would have to see evidence of it in the picture, and there is no such evidence. Of course, this means only that Carvalho's suggestion for an interpretive avenue for the painting is not viable, but it does not mean that there may not be other avenues that have not occurred to him. Indeed, one that I considered, but I did not explore, is that the disappearing lines suggest a control by some supernatural or divine being. As we saw in the discussion of *The Doctrine of Predestination* in my response to Ortega, Estévez is fond of using puppets and these disappearing lines in his work, and in some cases the meaning is more openly tied to forces beyond our control that are supernatural or divine. So here is an interpretive avenue that has some promise, and yet I did not explore it. So, why didn't I?

Carvalho does not suggest I ignore the lines because I missed them, although he is right in noting that I say that the lines that go up from the main puppet and disappear at the top of the picture are six instead of four. Rather, his surmise is that I did not explore the significance of these lines in my interpretation because they did not fit the preconceived philosophical scheme I used in the interpretation of the work of art. In this Carvalho is not far from the truth, for I did think



that bringing them into the interpretation would detract from the kind of interpretation I wanted to give. To have taken note of the lines would have introduced an element in the discussion that would have undermined the significance of the art work for the question of identities that I intended to explore, shifting the discussion toward another topic, namely, the control that may be exercised on humans by forces that lie outside the natural world. My concern in this interpretation was with the philosophical problem of how we can deal with the various identities which we have or are attributed to us, and not—although without prejudice—about the control over human actions by external agents.

The pertinent hermeneutic question, then, is whether this selective picking of elements in the picture makes my interpretation illegitimate or at least detracts from its value. Carvalho thinks it does, but I think this judgment is premature because in my view Carvalho does not sufficiently take into account the overall aim of the book and the key distinction I introduce in it to make my philosophical argument. Remember that this is a philosophical book, with a philosophical thesis and aim. I wrote it to legitimize the philosophical interpretation of art. And I did this by introducing a distinction between meaning and relational philosophical interpretations which Carvalho does not appreciate, although he gives no arguments for his judgment.

Ortega and I referred to these two kinds of interpretations already, but let me briefly recall what they are. Meaning interpretations aim to provide an understanding of the meaning of a work, although this meaning can be taken in various ways: as the meaning the author intended or understood, the meaning particular audiences understood, the meaning of the work independently of what the author or any particular audience understood, or the meaning in any of these ways considered together with its implications. Relational interpretations aim rather at an understanding of the relations between works and particular philosophical views, ideas, or arguments, although the relations could be between works of art and something else, such as historical facts, Freudian theories, or feminist points of view, in cases in which the interpretations are not philosophical.

In *Images of Thought* I argue that the notion of relational interpretation saves most philosophical interpretations from the charge that intentionalists, for example, bring against them (that they are illegitimate because they do not reveal the author's intention), and that they also explain how philosophical interpretations of art are possible in spite of the apparent differences between art and philosophy. Moreover, I claim that most of the interpretations I give in the book are in fact relational, although I allow for some meaning interpretations, particularly as we saw earlier when the very title of an art work suggests that it has to do with some philosophical doctrine or view, as happens with *The Doctrine of Predestination*. But even this limited claim I qualify, for I explicitly acknowledge that most philosophical interpretations, indeed, most interpretations of any kind, mix meaning and relation and yield understandings that are not narrowly of meanings or relations.

Now, because a relational interpretation is an understanding of a relation, the conditions of its value and legitimacy have to do with three things, as mentioned in my response to Ortega: the two relata, which in this case are the art work and the philosophy, and the relation itself. Each of these imposes conditions and serves to pick and choose from them what is pertinent. When one is bringing together three factors that play roles in an interpretation, it is essential to engage in selection and judgments of pertinence in order to succeed. Indeed, this happens with all relational interpretations, not just the

philosophical interpretations of art. Consider an example quite different from the ones in my book in order to prevent the charge that I am begging the question.

As some of you may know, I am currently exploring the artistic interpretation of literature. In order to do this I have been considering art works that have been presented as interpretations of Borges' stories. So let me refer briefly to two works, created by Luis Cruz Azaceta and Paul Sierra, of Borges' *The House of Asterion*. Borges' story is about the plight of the Minotaur, who is trapped in his labyrinth and finally released from it through Theseus' action of killing him. One pertinent aspect of these two works for us is their substantial differences, for they focus on entirely different aspects of the story and, as a result, ignore important elements in it. Azaceta's work presents us with a labyrinth which is actually the head of a man, while Sierra depicts a dead man with the head of a bull. The first ignores the monstrous nature of the Minotaur and the second ignores the labyrinth, yet both elements play important roles in Borges' story. Apart from these, there are many other elements in the story that the works of art ignore, but we need not belabor the point, which is that the artists have picked a focus and according to it selected some elements to emphasize and some to ignore. Incidentally, the very nature of the interpretation, which in this case is artistic and visual, dictates that certain elements in the story be ignored. A visual medium cannot do the same things that a verbal one can do, just as film can do certain things that a picture cannot.

Now, the interpretations by Azaceta and Sierra are relational in that the artists relate the story to something that is of particular importance to them. For Azaceta, it is the labyrinthine nature of the human predicament, and for Sierra it is death. Both are effective as works of art and as interpretations of Borges' story, and one reason for their effectiveness is precisely their selectivity. Interpretations that are exhaustive or ignore the nature of the enterprises employed are both exhausting and useless, for they lose their bearing and become scattered. The works by Azaceta and Sierra would lose much of their power and interest if they tried to depict everything that occurs in Borges' story.

This example illustrates how one of the essential elements of relational interpretations is selection and focus, because these kinds of interpretations need to find a point of unity between the relata. In *The Juggler* it is the metaphor of the juggler, which I use to refer to a philosophical explanation of the way in which various identities are negotiated, and in Estévez's work comes through as an image of a juggler juggling smaller versions of himself. There are other elements to the picture, but would they help this particular interpretation? In my opinion they would not. So I ignore them, as I did with the lines disappearing at the top of the picture, as well as the other elements to which Carvalho refers.

This procedure is anything but unorthodox in the philosophical interpretation of art, and I am surprised that Carvalho questions it. Indeed, Foucault himself, whose interpretation of *Las Meninas* Carvalho seems to regard as a model of a valuable interpretation, ignores obviously important elements in Velázquez's painting. Indeed, contrary to what Carvalho claims, Foucault is very far from "exhausting" the painting, leaving out much that is important and that puts into question his interpretations. If I were going to describe what Foucault says, I would say that he merely scratches the surface of *Las Meninas*. For example, what does Foucault make of the colors, or the dresses, in the picture? Does he consider the furniture and the hair style of the figures in it? And should he have avoided talking about the ways the painter depicts members of the royal family versus the way other Spanish



painters do? What about the frequently discussed “realism” of the Spanish School of painting? Is there something in the picture that speaks to it? Indeed, does Foucault even consider the physical conditions under which the painting seems to tell us it was painted? For our purposes, the last point is probably one of the most important ones that Foucault neglects to mention for our present purposes because, I surmise, it puts into doubt his interpretation. I am referring to the fact that the painting suggests that it was painted through the image on a mirror insofar as Velázquez and las meninas appear on the picture. Foucault’s central interpretive claim is that the painting we see, which includes Velázquez and las meninas, is not the work Velázquez is engaged in painting of which we see only the back, but rather a painting of the king and queen. And Foucault buttresses this claim in various ways but most importantly through what he takes to be a mirror image of the royal couple found on the far back wall of the painting we see.

The problem with this claim is that the place where the royal couple would have to be in order for them to pose for Velázquez’s painting is precisely the place where a mirror would have to be in order for Velázquez to be able to paint himself and las meninas. This puts into question Foucault’s thesis and makes us take a second look at the painting, and this opens the way to further difficulties. For example, why call the painting *Las Meninas* if it is about the royal couple? What do we make of the painting we see, which is indeed of las meninas and of Velázquez seemingly painting them? Do we have two paintings, one of las meninas and one of the royal couple? And if we do, which is the one hidden from view? Could we question Foucault’s thesis that the picture of the royal couple found on the wall at the back of the room is a mirror image rather than a portrait?

All this points to the fact that, although Foucault presents us with a very detailed discussion, he explores only some very limited aspects of the painting. Indeed, in his original remarks prepared for the APA Author-Meets-Critics session, Carvalho referred to Foucault’s exhaustive treatment of the painting, a point he qualified in the written version of his remarks included here, by applying it only to some elements of the painting. The reason is that in the verbal exchange at the session I pointed out that Foucault had been very selective in the parts of the work he explores. But Carvalho’s qualification, instead of strengthening his argument against relational interpretations in general and my interpretation of *The Juggler* in particular, weakens it, for it opens the door to questioning the reasons Foucault used to guide his focus and selectivity. In fact, Foucault focuses only on elements in the painting that are related to the philosophical point of view he brings into the picture, the theory that a painting reveals what is not in it, what is hidden, rather than what is plainly in view. This is certainly a philosophical point of view based on a theory of art that is anything but universally accepted. And if I am right about this, then we must surmise that Foucault is engaged in a relational interpretation in which he presents us with an understanding of the relation of his particular theory of art to a work of art, rather than on a meaning interpretation that seeks to understand the philosophy in the picture, rather than the relation of the picture to philosophy. All this suggests that Carvalho’s use of Foucault’s interpretation to justify his judgment, concerning the value of my interpretation, is ineffective.

In short, if we were going to find fault with my interpretation of *The Juggler* because my interpretation of it is relational and I ignore certain aspects of the work as a result of my preestablished philosophical views, we would similarly have to find fault with Foucault’s interpretation of *Las Meninas*. In my view, however, neither interpretation can be criticized

simply because it ignores certain elements of the work they interpret, although they could be criticized for other reasons, including that they neglect to take into consideration elements in the works that are relevant for their relational philosophical interpretations. Nor should the length of the discussion, as Carvalho seems to think, be significant. It should not be greatly important that my discussion of *The Juggler* is brief if compared with Foucault’s extended discussion of *Las Meninas* for two reasons. One is that *Las Meninas*, in comparison to *The Juggler*, is a very complicated painting. *The Juggler* is an interesting and provocative work of art, but it is a relatively simple drawing with few elements in it. Velázquez’s work, by contrast, is filled with details, so naturally one would expect a more detailed analysis. The other is that most interpretations of works of art, or of works of literature for that matter, are rather brief and to the point, rather than exhaustive. This is quite evident in Danto’s interpretation of Borges’ *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, in *The Transfiguration of the Common Place*, for example, where he claims that Borges raises for the first time the question of the identity of a literary work, but does so in no more than a few paragraphs. And this for the reason that interpreters engaged in philosophical relational interpretations have particular aims in mind, and the aims are philosophical and governed by philosophical points of view, rather than based exclusively on the configuration of the works of art.

The main problem with Carvalho’s argument is that it does not recognize the significance of relational interpretations. It is quite clear that, indeed, Carvalho privileges meaning interpretations when he questions whether I have not substituted my thought for the thought in the work of art. Carvalho wants the philosophy in the work of art to come out, as it were, to be made visible, rather than to understand the relation of what the work of art may have to do with this or that philosophy. This is precisely what a meaning philosophical interpretation is intended to do, whereas relational philosophical interpretations are intended to create an understanding of a relation between art and philosophy, not of the philosophy in a work of art.

Note that I do not by any means disparage meaning interpretations, although I find them to be very difficult when it comes to art, as I suggested in my answer to Ortega. In some cases I do indeed try to present such interpretations of Estévez’s work, but I think most philosophical interpretations of art turn out to be relational interpretations that are passed as meaning interpretations. This is certainly the case with Deleuze, and even with Foucault, although I think in Foucault’s case the relational interpretation of *Las Meninas* appears disguised as a meaning interpretation. Indeed, it is arguable that the difference between the roles of philosophy in meaning and relational interpretations are not, after all, substantively different. The difference is merely that in one the philosophy is not as explicit as in the other; the philosophy is there in both, guiding and establishing parameters of the interpretation. This is the old argument that humans always bring to the interpretive process a point of view and they see only what that point of view allows them to see. Now, I am not going to argue for this position here, I merely want to mention it so as to indicate that there are other ways in which an argument could be constructed against the position that Carvalho seems to favor.

Now let me go back to the third criticism that Carvalho formulates of my approach to interpretation. This is that it assumes too much. For one thing it assumes a certain view of what philosophy is, and for another it assumes a certain view of the history of the discipline in which philosophical problems and ideas are seen as trans-historical.

After what I have said, my answer to this objection should be obvious. In the case of relational philosophical

interpretations, the philosophy is brought in to be related to the art, and so it makes sense that a certain position be adopted and that the interpretation be presented in terms of it. Anything else is unrealistic, and perhaps even deceptive. In my case, because I am not a historicist, either epistemically or metaphysically, I must show my cards and give interpretations that take that into account. And if one's philosophical viewpoint is historicist, then the interpretations of the art would have to be very different. But does this detract from the value of my interpretations, or from the value of a historicist interpretation of the art? Not in my judgment, for the value and legitimacy of these interpretations would have to be determined precisely on the basis of criteria that go back to the aims of the interpretations and the philosophy used in them.

Much more could be said about the many points raised by Ortega and Carvalho, and about the ones I raise in my responses, but my space is limited, so I better stop. In closing, though, I would like to repeat how grateful I am to Ortega and Carvalho for challenging my position as presented in *Images of Thought*.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### *The Existential Turn in African American Philosophy: Disclosing the Existential Phenomenological Foundations of Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*

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The philosophical significance of George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* is not determined by appealing to the author's intentions or by claiming that its full meaning is contained within the work and can be immediately ascertained through a literal reading; rather, the importance of Yancy's text is mediated and established by reference to a philosophical interpretive community. Hence, in order to truly appreciate both the meaning of Yancy's text and its singular philosophical significance, this text should be read in the context of the African American philosophical interpretive community. In thus situating this text and, consequently, treating it as not communicating a preexisting essence or meaning, the significance and relevance of the text emerge from the realization that Yancy is intervening in the African American philosophical tradition in order to destabilize reigning styles of thinking that ignore the existential urgencies of Black existence. Let us examine one case of this failure to consider the concrete existence of Blacks as a site for existential philosophical analysis.

Tommie Shelby, in his *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, pursues a philosophical deconstruction of the idea of collective Black identity. Indeed, he considers this notion profoundly damaging to Blacks. I will quote Shelby in detail so as to capture the full flavor of his philosophical repudiation of the contentious idea of collective Black identity. He writes:

The criticism that seems to threaten the very idea of Black solidarity, attacking it at its roots, involves the much more controversial claim that "race" is not a

sound basis for social identities, cultural affiliations, membership in associations, public policy, or political movements. Some argue that racial identities and the forms of solidarity that they...sustain are irrational, incoherent, rooted in illusions, or morally problematic. Others contend that in light of increasing interracial antagonism and the need for multiracial cooperation, any form of racial particularism is invidious and needlessly divisive. Still others maintain that race-based solidarity is incompatible with widely cherished ideals such as racial integration, the affirmation of a shared American identity, and a color-blind society.

We should add to these concerns the well-known criticisms of "identity politics": namely, that such identity-based programs suffer from dangerous forms of essentialism and groupthink; that they distract from more pressing and important concerns, such as poverty, raising socioeconomic inequality, human rights violations, and the negative consequences of globalization; and that they are inconsistent with the liberal democratic values of individual autonomy, tolerance, and open public dialogue across lines of group difference. These criticisms have seemed to some to have particular force against political movements organized around the familiar ethno-racial identity of "Blackness."<sup>1</sup>

Taken to its logical conclusion, Shelby's philosophical project cannot accommodate sustained philosophical reflection on the concrete existence of Blacks and, by implication, on the idea of race, particularly when Black existence and the lived reality of race allegedly conflict with the universality of mainstream democratic liberalism.

The proceeding review will conform to the following outline: First, I will provide a general but brief description of the philosophical approach Yancy uses to ground his philosophical project; and, second, I will offer a detailed examination of Yancy's text, focusing on his declared goals and strategy, and the major insights of the most significant chapters of *Black Bodies, White Gazes*.

#### **Existential Phenomenology and Concrete Existence**

So why is Yancy's text significant within the tradition of African American philosophy? *Black Bodies, White Gazes* is philosophically significant due to its attempt to disclose the existential meaning of the Black body, as well as the lived reality of race from an existential phenomenological perspective. Put differently, Yancy is actively pursuing an African American existential philosophy, a philosophy focused on human existence. This existential turn in African American philosophy represents the fact that Yancy's approach to issues in African American philosophy shuns those philosophical movements associated with the linguistic turn in mainstream philosophy, namely, logical analysis, linguistic analysis, and conceptual analysis. Yancy favors a thick philosophical description of concrete existence. Furthermore, with regard to race, instead of embracing methods of analysis dogmatically committed to semantic purity while being antagonistic to the vagueness, ambiguity, and other blemishes of natural language, Yancy seeks to explore the concrete realities emergent from the exploitation of the fact that the concept of race does not claim any sharp boundaries but, nevertheless, thrives in virtue of its indefinite boundaries. The semantic plasticity of race cannot be contained on the assumption that the concept of race must adhere to necessary and sufficient conditions of meaningfulness modeled on the semantics of natural kind terms.

Another very important benefit of Yancy's existential phenomenological methodology is that it does not treat race as an abstract concept but rather discloses the intersubjectivity and saliency of race in everyday life. In Heideggerian language, an existential phenomenological approach exposes race as a ready-to-hand concept, a concept that immediately structures various practical activities. For example, socio-cultural interaction, social perception, and political judgment, etc., can all accommodate the pre-reflective utilization of race. Note, however, that it is only when our uncritical utilization of race in everyday practices is interrupted or causes political contention that we become obsessed with the objective ontological basis of the concept of race. In our mode of treating the concept of race as a present-to-hand concept, subjecting it to abstract critical analysis outside the context of its functioning in our form of life, we often forget its normal, everyday functioning. Finally, an existential phenomenological approach effectively demonstrates that the paradigmatic case of anti-Black racism is not necessarily identical to an overt act of violence but rather to actions sustained by mundane sentiments and attitudes that saturate the everyday world. However, to deny the plausibility of a realist treatment of race is not to surrender to incoherence and semantic confusion. And to the extent that Yancy considers an existential philosophical approach more palatable, more needs to be said about such an approach.

Hence, in returning to the idea of Yancy's existential project, we should not understand the idea of an existential phenomenology of African American existence as implying that Yancy is pursuing a mere sociological or anthropological description of African American existence. Rather, it would be more accurate to understand Yancy's project as an exploration of various regions of Black existence. So, his aim is not simply to provide a description for its own sake, but rather for the purpose of elucidating the meaning of the African American's being in the world. This elucidation need not develop in a void or in abstraction. Rather, it is concretely situated in the life-world of culture, namely, in "the all-encompassing horizon of meaning in which the rituals of our action and interaction take place in the midst of other people, cultural objects, and natural things."<sup>2</sup>

Yancy's point of departure is the concrete individual Black person struggling to make sense of his/her existence. In other words, Yancy focuses on the concrete, existing Black individual and that individual's sense of being in the world precisely because there are no transcendental truths to serve as the epistemological and ontological foundation of Black existence. This being the case, Black subjectivity, that is, the concrete individual, assumes major philosophical significance in Yancy's thinking. Indeed, his own experiences are prominent in his text, and their presence is so compelling that, following Nietzsche, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that this text is biographical.

This development is unique precisely because Yancy is probing the limits of representation with regard to Black existence. In other words, he is skeptical about the capability of positivistic and empirical modes of analysis to render Black existence intelligible in its own right. This opposition allows him to escape the ugly drama of imposing debilitating pathologies on the being of Blacks. Being aware of the conceptual contention surrounding philosophical efforts to think and write about Black existence in the analytical categories of the various normative discourses of mainstream philosophy, a philosophy unquestionably dedicated to logical reconstruction as opposed to historical reconstruction, Yancy embraces a style of philosophical investigation amenable to the dynamic intensities of human existence. Indeed, as previously stated, he appropriates various themes of existential philosophy that,

in his view, are more appropriate to the task of investigating the concreteness of Black existence. Accordingly, Yancy, once again, affirms the indeterminacy of existence clearly indicating his disavowal of the idea that there exists some determinate structuring principle that grounds the being of Blacks. Because of this development, *Black Bodies, White Gazes* is an existential philosophical treat, due mainly to Yancy's accentuation of four important existential themes. First, he acknowledges the contingency of human existence in the sense that there are no preexisting transcendental truths or principles that ground human existence; second, he affirms the existential relevance and plausibility of narrative modes of understanding of the world and the self; third, Yancy emphasizes the historicity of ontology, specifically the idea that structures and modes of existence are the products of human choice and decisions. Furthermore, that human existence is always embedded in the dialectical web of the past, present, and future. Finally, he celebrates the idea of the self as a construction while repudiating the notion that the self is shaped by a fixed essence. With this context in place, I turn to examine Yancy's text in greater detail. I will first focus on his own account of his goals and second offer a brief description of the crucial philosophical insights of the most important chapters in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*.

### **Deciphering the Core Goals and Themes of *Black Bodies, White Gazes***

Yancy provides the best description of the main substantive issues investigated in his text. Indeed, the cluster of ideas in *Black Bodies, White Gazes* that Yancy indirectly seeks to render philosophically untenable are as follows:

A great deal of important scholarly work argues that race is semantically empty, ontologically bankrupt, and scientifically meaningless. In short, many philosophers posit that race is an illusion, that there is no factual support for a racial taxonomy. Since race has no referent and does not cut at the joints of reality, so to speak, it is said to be a fiction. Thus we are told to abandon the concept of race just as we abandoned the concepts of phlogiston and spontaneous generation. A physicalist's rejection of race is logically compatible with acceptance of racial eliminativism. "The eliminativist argues that races do not exist, either because they fail to be objective or because they've been falsely posited by hopeless theories of human difference." The problem with this, however, is that the phenomenological or lived intelligibility and reality of race (as it is socially ontologically lived) exceed what is deemed "real" within the framework of physicalist ontology. Indeed, one can reject the concept of race from a physicalist perspective and yet engage in various forms of social performance that are racist. In other words, one can live/embody the fiction of race in such a way that generates real effects in the social world. It is also important to note that to believe that there is nothing more to say about race because it is impossible to reduce it to a naturally occurring object in the spatiotemporal world is to engage in a form of disciplinary hegemony.<sup>3</sup>

And, so it is the case that one of Yancy's major philosophical tasks is to shed philosophical light on the phenomenological legitimacy and the lived reality of race. He pursues this task by focusing on how Blacks concretely live the reality of race. Accordingly, Yancy considers the physicalist ontological status of race to be philosophically irrelevant, precisely because the social and lived reality of race is philosophically averse to the way things are totally independent of human beliefs, intentions,

consciousness, etc. Unlike natural scientific concepts, socio-cultural concepts, such as race, do not acquire semantic legitimacy by faithfully fulfilling necessary and sufficient conditions of meaningfulness. Consequently, the ontological and semantic status of race depends on dynamic human activities that constitute and shape the socio-political world. Nature did not force the concept of race upon human beings. Rather, human beings exercised their creative imaginations, and in an amazing display of autocatalytic competence, constructed the concept of race; they then structured a socio-cultural world on the basis of race; and this socio-cultural reality in turn functioned as a permanence that rendered the concept of race both semantically and ontologically meaningful.

Yancy's second major task is to pursue a philosophical existential phenomenological study of Black existence by focusing specifically on the Black body, namely, Black embodiment. Consistent with his socio-existential orientation, Yancy does not approach the Black body as a natural kind, precisely because an existential analysis of the Black body, considered as a construction of the white gaze, is not the kind of phenomenon that lends itself to neat abstract linguistic analysis or precise logical analysis. The Black body marks the existence of a consciousness in the world and not the abstract presence of an ideal objective content; the Black body is not analogous to the objective content expressed by propositions.

Consequently, in good phenomenological style, Yancy brackets the naturalistic scientific standpoint that would have unnecessarily involved him in matters of biology. Avoiding any dubious physicalistic reduction of the Black body, Yancy underscores the fact that the Black body is, from an ontological perspective, an historical construction. Indeed, he both appreciates the historical framing of the Black body within the context of an anti-Black world but, at the same time, he does not summarily reduce the Black body exclusively to its historical construction by the various forces of anti-Black racism. Nevertheless, his main point is one regarding the radical historicity of the Black body. He writes:

[T]he meaning of Black embodiment is disclosed within the context of an anti-Black racist world. The disclosure of its meaning, while inextricably and relationally tied to the history of anti-Black racism, is not reduced to that history. The point here is that the meaning of the Black body is historical. And as historical, the Black body [is] explored not in terms of an ontology of essences, but in terms of a historical ontology that appreciates the fluidity of the historical formation of the meaning of, in this case, the Black body....<sup>4</sup>

Yancy is at pains to categorically denounce the idea that the meaning of the Black body is ontologically dependent upon pre-given essences. Similarly, he wants to combat the idea that the Black body is ontologically passive or reactive; rather, in underscoring the historical meaning of the Black body, he also stresses the affirmative and creative aspects of the meaning of the Black body. Contrarily, he promotes the idea of the body as "a site of contestation." "That the body is a site of contested meanings," he states, "signifies the historicity of its 'being' as lived and meant within the interstices of social semiotics, institutional force and various discursive frames of reference. [T]he body," he tells us, "is less a thing or a being than a shifting or changing historical meaning that is subject to cultural configuration and reconfiguration."<sup>5</sup> That the Black body is a historically constituted site of meaning and affects entails that any existential and concrete understanding of the Black body must acknowledge the extent to which the white gaze has historically constructed the Black body through the

lens of pathology. So far, my engagement with Yancy's text has been at a rather high degree of abstraction. What I will do now is to pursue a detailed discussion of its major chapters.

In chapter one, entitled "The Elevator Effect: Black Bodies/White Bodies," Yancy provides a concrete biographical example of how the white gaze constructs the Black body through the conceptual frames of institutional racist presuppositions. Indeed, anti-Black constructions of the Black body deny the ontological freedom characteristic of the self. The Black person is seen as lacking dynamic subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> Yancy's captivating account of his encounter of the white woman in the elevator, not intended as an indictment of all whites, stunningly demonstrates the subtle yet highly offensive phenomenon of the construction of the Black body as a site of deviancy and pathology. Yancy's narration and analysis of this encounter disclose the concrete peculiarity of being perceived as exemplifying an essence. This realization forces the Black subject to negotiate the tension emergent from his/her conception of the Black body as a site of dynamic subjectivity and his/her own awareness of how the white gaze perceives one's Black body as ontologically suspect.

Yancy maintains that the shared lived-experience of being perceived as an individuating case of a criminal or pathological essence allows Blacks to function as an epistemic community. He rejects the view that all knowers can be reasonably substituted for one another when it comes to competently recognizing whether an act is racist or not. For Yancy, epistemological competence in interpreting gestures in the socio-cultural world is not analogous to the model of rational inquirers motivated strictly on the basis of so-called objective facts. Championing what I would call an epistemology of the body, in conjunction with resisting efforts "to flatten out significant differential histories," Yancy claims that Blacks form an epistemic community, a community of knowers. Their epistemological competence in detecting racist acts emerge from "background histories of oppression that Blacks have experienced vis-à-vis [anti-Black racism]."<sup>7</sup>

In chapter three, entitled "The Return of the Black Body: Seven Vignettes," Yancy expands on the idea of Blacks constituting an epistemic community with regard to interpreting racial experience. Indeed, Yancy reiterates James Snead's point that "To theorize the Black body one must 'turn to the [Black] body as the radix for interpreting racial experience."<sup>8</sup> He concludes that focusing on concrete experience does not entail a surrender to the impossibility of knowledge; rather, it is a matter of realizing that there is knowledge connected to the "raced" body. Here Yancy is, once again, challenging mainstream philosophical assumptions about knowledge in order to make room for the plausibility of a kind of knowing intimately connected with the lived experiences of the body. As he writes:

I theorize from a place of lived embodied experience, a site of exposure. In philosophy, the only thing we learn to "expose"...is a weak argument, a fallacy, or someone's "inferior" reasoning power. The embodied self is bracketed and deemed irrelevant to theory, superfluous and cumbersome in one's search for truth. It is best, we are told, to reason from nowhere.<sup>9</sup>

Yancy uses the phrase "the return of the Black body" in the title of chapter three, to name the phenomenon of the erasing of Black subjectivity through acts of humiliation, denigration, etc.—a process that requires Blacks to conform to various acts of ontological disfigurement. In this context, we can introduce Sartre's notion of "my body-as-known-by-others," the perception one takes on one's own body from the perspectives of others. The Black body as constructed through

the white gaze is returned to the Black as other than it is; the Black body becomes alien and unrecognized by Blacks. Yancy maintains that this ontological disfiguring of the Black body is not the manifestation of any rational incapacity but is, instead, motivated by a desire to preserve white power through the exercise of the asymmetrical power differential enjoyed by whites. Yancy declares his objective as to

describe and theorize a variety of instances in which the Black body is reduced to instantiations of the white imaginary, resulting in what I refer to as “the phenomenological return of the Black body.” These instantiations are embedded within and evolve out of the complex social and historical interstices of whites’ efforts at self-construction through complex acts of erasure and denigration of Black people. These acts of self-construction are myths or ideological constitutions predicated upon maintaining white power.<sup>10</sup>

Yancy offers a detailed description of the disfigurement of the Black body through an analysis of ritual performances of whiteness predicated on “objectifying, exoticizing, and sexualizing the Black body, inscribing it with myths and codes....”<sup>11</sup> And the concrete means through which these activities are executed range from humiliation through the abuse of power to hypervisibility and even invisibility. These practices function to remind Blacks of the impossibility of escaping their ontological Blackness. Furthermore, in order to underscore the fact that Blackness cannot function normatively, this is, represent the human, mainstream constructions of Blackness exploit morphological differences as indisputable evidence of biological degeneration.

Although Yancy seeks to underscore the construction of the Black body through the gaze of the white other, he also does not limit the Black body exclusively to its construction by the white gaze. Indeed, in order to demonstrate the existential thesis of existence preceding essence and that the Black self is ontologically a historical reality, Yancy, in chapter four, entitled “The Agential Black Body: Resisting the Black Imago in the White Imaginary,” investigates how Blacks have exercised their ontological transcendence in order to escape imprisonment in anti-Black facticity. Yancy strategically avoids entrapment in modes of theorizing that treat Blacks as lacking creative human agency. However, he does not merely assert that Blacks have creative human agency; he concretely grounds this claim through a refreshing philosophical appropriation of the historiography of resistance by Blacks against efforts to reduce them to things. Yancy’s construal of Black resistance is not modeled on the idea that meaningful resistance to oppression must necessarily target freedom as its desired goal. Here, Yancy gives resistance an existential connotation and understands Black resistance as meaning the ability to not simply say no but, more importantly, to say yes; he claims that to resist is to affirm. Hence, Black resistance is first an ontological repositioning of the Black self, namely, a transition of the Black self from its normal condition of being-in-the-world as a “pre-reflective cogito,” satisfied with its explicit background awareness of things to a critical awareness of its possibilities. Black resistance, in the context of the concrete existential struggle of the Black self against the appropriation of the Black body by the white gaze, is also a matter of Blacks transcending confinement in a debilitating facticity. In recognizing their transcendence, Blacks become aware of themselves as agents who can affect the normative character of the universe by creating values. Yancy maintains that “In affirming themselves as individuals and collective sites of possibility, sites of value, Blacks realize that values are for the claiming/taking, that values are founded through human practices, and that as a lack, as an ontological

excess, as it were, new modes of being, new ways of valuing can be explicitly taken up” (113).<sup>12</sup>

Black resistance is also an epistemological awakening of the Black self with profound implications for understanding and interpreting Black existence. Resistance can take the form of rejecting institutionalized narratives of Blacks that are not faithful to their existential hermeneutical self-understanding. This narrative resistance requires the invention of categories or narratives, according to Yancy, that are capable of illuminating Blacks’ being-in-the-world, or rather Blacks’ historicity. And to the extent that the focus is on Blacks’ historicity, Yancy claims that “the discourse of workable and unworkable narratives replaces the logic of metaphysical essentialism regarding racial identities, and dispenses with the correspondence theory of truth.”<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, then, Yancy’s objective is not to romanticize the situation of Blacks who were compelled to endure horrific conditions of existence. He distinguishes between macro resistance targeting the status quo, resistance that often takes the form of organized social movements, and micro resistance that is more fragmented and individualized. Yancy reports that slaves, while engaging in micro resistance, broke tools in order to disrupt the everyday exploitation of their bodies. Whereas whites interpreted these acts as evidence of the clumsiness and the stupidity of Blacks, Yancy argues that this action “was one way that enslaved Black people were able to exercise control of their work. To break a tool...requires the establishment of a different/alternative way of relating to a given object. ...To engage in this type of alternative engagement involves the telic dimensions of embodied subjectivity.”<sup>14</sup>

Chapter five, “Exposing the Serious World of Whiteness through Frederick Douglass’s Autobiographical Reflections,” appropriates Douglass’s encounter with Covey to represent a persistent reality of Black existence. Instead of resorting to the pathological term “Black rage,” we can speak instead of anguish and construe Black anguish as the experience of oneself as a being, adequately qualified to freely choose from among a range of possibilities. In anguish, the Black individual, like Douglass, encounters his or her life as not determined exclusively by forces beyond one’s control, but as something that the individual must choose. Black anguish is directed not necessarily at an external object, but toward oneself as a for-itself capable of choosing from an array of possibilities. Douglass’s confrontation with Covey symbolically transcended its physical performance and pointed to the deeper reality of Douglass’s ontological freedom.

In chapter six, “Desiring Bluest Eyes, Desiring Whiteness,” Yancy continues his exploration of the lived embodied experience of the Black body in the world. In this chapter Yancy uses Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* to illustrate the relevance of imagination to philosophy. Here, Yancy discusses the pernicious effects of whiteness in shaping the desires of Blacks. But in reflecting on the corrosive effect of the desire for whiteness, Yancy at the same time emphasizes the extent to which Morrison uses *The Bluest Eye* to engage “in a form of textual exposure of whiteness as a historically contingent set of practices.”<sup>15</sup> The existential implication of *The Bluest Eye* speaks to the extent to which a desire for whiteness by the character Pecola is another existential instance of the fact that, within American society, “the Black self is always already formed through discourse, through various practices that ‘confirm’ the Black self as ugly, bestial, and worthless.”<sup>16</sup>

Yancy maintains that Morrison’s writing utilizes the imagination to disclose insights about the Black body that are not necessarily amenable to systematic philosophical communication. In other words, reason reached its limits with

regard to crystallizing the liminality of Black existence. Yancy writes:

Within the context of a narrative, as opposed to a philosophical architectonic system, Morrison is able to place the reader into an imaginative lived space, a powerful narrative space that is able to articulate modalities of lived existence where bodies are raped, racially brutalized, dehumanized, marginalized, and traumatized. In short, through narrative, Morrison moves the reader through the messiness of the impact of contingent history upon the body.<sup>17</sup>

I consider Yancy's basic existential approach to the study of the concrete realities of Black existence and the Black body philosophically plausible. The virtue of his existential approach is its focus on the constructivity of the Black body and the historical emergence of Black existence. Nevertheless, I think that to the extent that Yancy's focus is on the Black body, there is one issue that warrants greater philosophical attention. Yancy correctly does not endorse essentialism with regard to the Black body. He acknowledges that both the Black male body as well as the Black female body are constructions that are historically grounded. However, if it is true that bodily existence is intimately connected to embodied consciousness, then it would seem highly problematic to speak in terms of a Black body instead of recognizing the concrete existence of a Black female body represented by a radically different subjectivity relative to a Black male subjectivity. I am not saying that Yancy consciously and deliberately believes that the lived reality of the Black female is identical to the lived reality of the Black male. Indeed, he discussed the horrendous historical case of Sara Bartman, who was stripped of her autonomy and humanity and subjected to the pornographic gaze of a voyeuristic white public.

However, since there are crucial historical differences that distinguish the construction of the Black female body relative to the Black male body under the white gaze, it would seem that any philosophical consideration of the Black body should work through the philosophical ramifications of the dense historical differences of Black female existence. The reality of Black female existence has historically been constrained by various epistemic regimes and material practices that have variously constructed the Black female body as an object of desire, as a source of labor, as the absence of reason, as an uncultivated sexuality, and as a reproductive machine.

### Conclusion

I initiated this review by engaging texts in the African American philosophical tradition, and I will conclude by calling attention to a text dedicated to the study of the law and the Black female body. Dorothy Roberts in her book, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, writes that "The essence of Black women's experience during slavery was the brutal denial of autonomy over reproduction. Female slaves were commercially valuable to their masters not only for their labor, but also for their ability to produce more slaves."<sup>18</sup> Current political resistance to abortion rights and the troubling link between opposition to welfare and the Black female body underscore the extent to which the Black female body is still constrained in oppressive political efforts of control and humiliation. So, given the dense otherness historically associated with the concrete reality of the Black female body, any serious philosophical investigation of the Black body must work through the tangled existential differences that have shaped the lived reality of Black female existence.

I do not consider the preceding critical concern as an indictment of Yancy's courageous project but as an issue whose philosophical importance requires that we transcend the formal

acknowledgment of the construction of the Black female body and focus on concrete differences. Consequently, the challenge is to build on the suggestive existential phenomenological insights on Black existence, broadly speaking, provided by Yancy. The transition from mere descriptive narratives to normative concerns demands that African American philosophers work through the radical implications of the ontological differences of Black female subjectivity.

### Endnotes

1. Tommie Shelby. *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2-3
2. *Existential Phenomenology and Political Theory: A Reader*, edited by Hwa Yol Jung (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1972), xix.
3. George Yancy. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 33
4. *Ibid.*, p. xxi.
5. *Ibid.*, p. xxii.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 66
11. *Ibid.*, p. 204
12. *Ibid.*, p. 113
13. *Ibid.*, p. 115
14. *Ibid.*, p. 122
15. *Ibid.*, p. 185
16. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
18. Dorothy Roberts. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 26

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## ***Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race***

George Yancy (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008). 265 pp.

**Reviewed by David Clinton Wills**  
Stony Brook University

*Black Bodies, White Gazes* by George Yancy is an eye-opening discussion on race that searches furiously through a broad, intellectual trove for original and breathtaking insights. Yancy engages the reader with a focused discussion, from his dedication—For all bodies that suffer—to a powerful conclusion that relentlessly unpacks the issues at stake in bold ways. Ultimately, the electricity with which Yancy develops his argument across seven interwoven chapters invigorates the reader with the charge, as he offers, to "live one's body in freedom" (246).

Yancy provides a resonantly precise voice to many experiences that are in common for many of those amongst the black experience. I believe this is the very power of his argumentation. The number of times that I shook my head in agreement, musing to myself how his words represented exactly how I have felt, were countless. Most tellingly, I encourage you to look at the attention and accuracy with which Yancy details an exchange in an elevator, subtly flushing out the dynamic of race and the inhabitation of space in an experience that I am sure is common to many (if not all) black men in America.

From the first chapters, Yancy clearly states that, “[f]rom the perspective of whiteness, I am, contrary to the existentialist credo, an essence (“Blackness”) that precedes my existence” (1). Then, through the careful exegesis of experience and text, Yancy explains this inversion.

What Yancy gives us in this introduction (and the text at large) is not an analysis of solely experience, but an explanation of feeling, and I believe this is how his analysis maintains its theoretical gravitas. Feelings of fear, hatred, authenticity, desire, and privilege are at the core of his discussion. Yancy’s accounts take us beyond the immediate and into something deeper. Again, this exchange in an elevator is one of the many, fecund moments in which Yancy applies to great benefit in the text and his analysis of this alone is worthy of a thorough read of the entire work.

Through *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, one is able to engage with a thorough discussion of blackness and whiteness that balances aspects of experience and theory. Yancy draws from a broadly versed toolset of critical race theory, Africana studies, feminism, phenomenology, ancient philosophy, trauma studies, Caribbean philosophy, sociology, political philosophy, media studies, literature, and music amongst many others in order to take advantage of their diverse conceptual tools. He frees himself from being hemmed in by any one, particular; intellectual discourse, to tell this story on a broad canvas in tightly woven and judiciously argued ways. With this diverse literature at his back, Yancy engages with personal experience in fairly equal proportion. Whether Yancy is speaking about Emmanuel Levinas and perception or an elevator ride with a white woman and racial dynamics, it is always done with a precision that takes the reader directly to the kernel of the argument. Yancy’s movements in discussions of personal experience and critical theory are judicious, productive, and relevant. They are what make this book so great.

Yancy brings original insight to well-tread texts, pulling from an intellectual register that will be very familiar to those in philosophy and in race and ethnic studies, bringing new life. Yancy does a great justice to the richness of these texts, showing exciting new directions and depths with which we can understand classic figures such as Kant, Du Bois, or Shakespeare. Particularly, I would like to point out the rich analysis of desire in his readings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Toni Morrison. Yancy moves between the two intellects with a seamless interplay that joists their words together, interspersing their various ideas in a metanarrative of blackness and white desire. Yancy’s analyses of these two thinkers are so vibrant that you are encouraged to revisit, reread, and rethink the original works as he brings new lenses with which to read them. Also, I encourage that we pay close attention to the powerful conceptions that Yancy offers such as whiteness as ambush (an original metaphor on his part), individual and institutional antiracism, and the dynamic of power and race. These are just a few of the many original offerings that Yancy contributes to the intellectual traditions through which he grounds this text.

Though *Black Bodies, White Gazes* comes hurtling with a strong title, unabashedly with the risk of its own intensity, it is our first clue into one of the critical frameworks that Yancy utilizes in the text. This rich title belies the extensive Fanonian analyses and voice that Yancy brings through the discussion. Yancy quotes, applies, and deconstructs Fanon, and in using him at well-placed moments, Yancy evokes and develops the timbre of his analysis. With this, Yancy adds to the rich tradition of Africana Philosophy upon which his work proudly relies.

Additionally, the title belies the European phenomenological analysis at play as Yancy works through systems of thought by Hegel, Husserl, and Levinas, giving a detailed account on how themes of light and dark as sight and exposure demonstrate how basic perceptions are skewed towards particular ideologies. Yancy bridges these two worlds of race/ethnic studies and philosophy in effortless, engaging, and flawless ways, moving deftly about one through to the other; applying a freshness to things that we thought we knew everything about and dazzling the reader with new insights. Again, though the reader will be familiar with this cannon, they will not be familiar with his reading, and it is through this dynamic originality that the text gives its readers a great deal with which they must reconcile.

This book is for anyone who ever enters an elevator, shops at a store, crosses a street, locks a car door, or clutches a bag. It is for anyone who reads books, watches movies, listens to music, attends school, or doesn’t attend school. Anyone can benefit from reading *Black Bodies, White Gazes* as Yancy covers a gamut of ways in which racism is present through bold and challenging readings of everyday experiences that are unfortunately made germane to being Black in a racist society. Yancy is fearless to free his ideas beyond academia as the book invites a broad audience. Yancy takes the time to explain ideas at theoretical and experiential levels, giving a multitude of avenues by which one can understand and benefit from his text.

Yancy respects his base of personal experience, never takes advantage of it, and is never dependent on it. He benefits from it and realizes that he can grow from it as well. Yancy asks for no permission to draw from his personal history. When telling the story of being the only black person in an African-American literature class where the collision of experience and intellect comes hurtling towards each other in challenging ways, I dare the reader not to see himself in that very same room. Yancy also refers to experiences as a child and as a professional with similar bravo. The ground was pulled from beneath me by the concluding chapter in which Yancy catapults his originating thesis to staggeringly intriguing heights, most pointedly revisiting an analysis from the beginning as he insists upon a point that he knew, after 200 pages, the reader would still be grappling with at the end of his book.

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## SUBMISSIONS

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### Call for papers

The fall 2010 issue of the APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy will be open to any topic on Hispanic/Latino philosophy. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting.

### Call for book reviews

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.



## Deadlines

June 15, 2010

Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions to:

Editor: Bernie Cantens

Moravian College

Department of Philosophy

1200 Main Street

Bethlehem, PA 18018

E-mail: bcantens@moravian.edu

## Formatting Guidelines

The APA Newsletters adhere to The Chicago Manual of Style.

Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (--).

Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:

- John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90

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