

Only That They Be Spineless: Centering Race and Racism in Philosophical Conversations about Justice

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“White men in their 40s, reading James Baldwin for the first time,
are not going to solve the problems of racism in America.”

—Cable television newscast, June 2020

The words echoed in my brain. I continued to watch in horror as George Floyd's murder, which had occurred days before, was endlessly debated and dissected. I don't remember what the commentators said next, for I had turned my head to the side table next to me, and there, astride the comfortable couch on which I was able to relax at ease and watch the newscast like it were a movie or sports broadcast from which I could easily flip away as I preferred to, or not, was a copy of *The Fire Next Time*. Next to it was my wallet, and inside, my license. November 1981. I had just made it.

Or had I? For the previous two decades I spent little time focused on anything other than earning my Ph.D. and searching out a job in the academy, a dream inspired in me by a philosophy professor who changed my life when I was a sophomore in college. At the same time, I made the acquaintance of a person who became one of my closest, dearest friends, despite our different backgrounds: he of Indian descent, me of Irish and Italian; he from the city, me from the suburbs, or the country, as he preferred to call it. I learned much from listening to him, particularly about what it was to grow up Brown in a country that was predominantly white.

Despite the many conversations he and I had about racism in America, how he had been affected by it, my struggle to understand or even recognize it, no content of the sort ever surfaced in my classroom conversations. It was for this reason that, in the midst of our talking about George Floyd, he challenged me directly, saying, “What will your response be to this in the classroom?” I went through the usual replies: this sort of topic is outside of my expertise, I don't know the right words, I wouldn't know where to begin.

A pause. Patience. Then it came: “You are one of the most educated people in the world, right?” Hesitation. “Don't play modest. You have a Ph.D., which means you are among the top 2% most educated people in the world.¹ In that education, in your moving through a bachelor's, two master's degrees, and a doctorate, how many times did you have a teacher, counselor, or professor ever lead a conversation about race or racism?” Quiet; an

indication of zero. “My brother—do you really want your students twenty years from now to be just as silent after they have had you as their teacher?”

I did not.

Why talk about race and racism in the classroom? The question might well be asked about any topic that surfaces on a classroom syllabus, because questions, as the ancient philosopher Plato knew well, do not arise without a context from which they arise, for which reason the Platonic dialogues, which form the foundation of so many of my courses, nearly always begin with Socrates speaking to particular persons about a specific question that emerges in the midst of the wandering and often confused circumstances of their everyday lives.² Questions cannot be posed in the abstract, i.e., without consideration of the identity of the ones for whom the question matters, and thus, to discover what topic is on a syllabus is to simultaneously learn something of the identity of the ones for whom that syllabus is created, and also, of the one who creates it.

I have already said something of the latter, but will add that Parker Palmer’s insistence that “we teach who we are” is relevant here. Palmer argues that when I teach, I project onto my students the condition of my own soul; the entanglements I experience in the classroom are often the convolutions of my inner life, and so teaching holds a mirror to the soul, from which I gain self-knowledge. The kinds of questions I think are worth pursuing and the way in which I pursue them emerge from my experience as a white man raised and educated in predominantly white spaces. I do not believe that this observation means that my education was not worthwhile; but it clearly means that the contours of that education, the boundaries of what was discussed or not, were circumscribed within the larger horizon of a context in which, at least in my own case, questions about race and racism simply did not emerge. No; let me be more intentional: no one raised such questions. My friend’s challenge was akin to his holding up a mirror to me and asking: who is this person, what matters to him, and why do some things matter to him when others do not?

Such mirroring is not just good friendship; as Palmer continues, it is also good teaching, for “when I cannot know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well.”³ If unexamined questions about race and racism lurk in my own mind, I have little doubt that they percolate, quietly, in my students’ minds as well, and they are the ones for whom I am creating my syllabus. Students want to talk about race because they live it daily,⁴ though white students often feel ill equipped and unable to engage in racial conversations.⁵ More broadly, students are more and more hesitant to talk about anything that might be controversial.⁶ And yet it is precisely these sorts of topics—politics, sex and gender, religion, morality—that constitute the texture of our everyday experience. If we cannot talk about them, then we bring neither

ourselves nor the world to the classroom; our education is not genuine. Indeed, it's not really education.

As I am thinking of it here, education is the transformative experience of intellectual encounter that draws me forth from myself into dialogical community with others, a far cry from what Paulo Freire famously called the banking model of education, characterized by the monological depositing of allegedly neutral information into the purportedly empty of head passive recipients who absorb it as if it were absolute truth, rather than the taking up of difficult problems by teachers and students together in a dialectical companionship that honors the challenges of an often contested sense of reality.⁷ Cultivating a classroom space that embodies this latter spirit makes for well-rounded human beings and good citizens. Perhaps it is for this reason that Plato's Socrates pursues what our students might think of as controversial topics most ardently, and even suggests that one of his most prized students, the infamous Athenian general Alcibiades, should gaze into his soul and see himself reflected as if in a mirror.⁸ The beautiful, socially and politically well-networked young aristocrat must catch a glimpse of himself in the eyes of the weathered, poor old working class eccentric if he is to make a substantive impact on his democracy. It is, in other words, only in his encounter with difference, with people who are unlike him, with those whose backgrounds, experiences, and ideas challenge and compel him to grow into a more relational human being, that he can claim to be educated in a meaningful way.

I suspect it is for this and similar reasons that contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han has sounded the alarm against artificial intelligence, which he claims lacks the negativity of rupture that invites thinking. Thinking requires difference, a kind of mindful resistance to accepting the given; artificial intelligence, he says, just prolongs the same.⁹ As educators we want students to question assumptions and categories, which means the last thing we want them to do, particularly with complicated, often highly emotionally charged topics like race and racism, is to consult a technology that simply repeats norms and that reproduces the prevailing opinions they are supposed to be interrogating, which is, of course, precisely what they will do if we do not create space for them to speak thoughtfully about these topics. The trivial, easy responses of artificial intelligence will be just what we wish our students not to be, i.e., vacuous and clichéd, and as Hannah Arendt famously argued, the ease with which these kinds of slogans and empty words are mindlessly repeated render them the preferred ideological tools of tyrants and totalitarians.¹⁰

It should be said that classroom conversations that center race and racism are not without risk. One might reasonably object, for instance, that focusing on race perpetuates division. If this concern is that "perpetuate" means something like "cause," I confess I disagree: to engage questions of difference does not entail division. The former, by definition, is a matter of distinction, the latter of antagonism. There may be unity in difference, and if the divisive happens to creep into discussion, the honest educator humbly meets students there with the authentic hope of building bridges where it is

so tempting for them to erect walls. If, alternatively, the concern is that “perpetuate” means something like “make worse,” I would invite us to consider what not initiating any conversation about such things really amounts to, which, it seems to me, is the attempt to adopt a neutral position of silence in which the actual world, where there is indubitably already division, is simply irrelevant in the classroom. Such a view, so academically assured by its own calculating quietude, ignites what it intends to snuff out, for if students do not learn to thoughtfully engage difference, they are far more likely to dismiss it, at least, or demean it, at worst, and it is *these* actions that perpetuate division. As Saint Augustine insisted long ago, one is never in a neutral position concerning something like virtue and vice, i.e., with the substantial questions of what it is to be human and to live a good life; we either endeavor to become, with all the very real difficulties of the effort, more virtuous, or we do not, and if we do not, we are not neutral; we are one step closer to vice.

One might also not unreasonably object that such conversations are difficult to conduct, and that they themselves might even inadvertently reproduce racial hierarchies. I wholeheartedly agree about the risk of both possibilities, and for this reason believe it is imperative that those who seek to venture into these dialogical waters first seek out professional development opportunities and trainings that assist educators in navigating the ship of their discussions amidst the very real icebergs of unconscious bias, exclusive language, and cultural incompetence. Not to do so would be a grave harm to all who enter the classroom, and above all, those who enter the classroom whose lives outside the classroom are most hurt by such racial hierarchies.

Ultimately, race talk, like so many discussions that center markers of difference, is not free from the possibility of conflict. But as Philadelphia public school educator Matthew R. Kay argues, conflict is often the result of great curriculum design, and we should be worried if our discussions never cause conflict, for its absence might belie the fact that we are only skimming the surface of complexity, not challenging our students’ intellects.¹¹ Education, particularly in a discipline such as mine, which for thousands of years has had to deal with the accusation that it has its head in the clouds,¹² must self-consciously and intentionally keep its feet on the ground and respond to the pressing controversies of the time and place in which it finds itself, a task that well may require teachers to themselves undergo the very transformation they seek to foster in their students.

Such a teacher does not claim to have all the answers; Socrates certainly did not.¹³ What he did insist upon was the priority of conversation in which we move earnestly into the heart of the real over debate in which we only seek victory.¹⁴ It is better, he wagered, to accept our confusion and even anxiousness as a springboard from which we dive into the pool of dialogue and community, which is preferable to a cautious comfort in which we deny ourselves the presence of the other on the supposition that it’s better that we all just not swim, pretend it isn’t hot out, and swelter alone. Readers of Heather McGhee’s *The Sum of Us* perhaps intuited the oblique reference: at

the dawn of the Civil Rights Era, hundreds of massive public pools were set to be integrated throughout the United States. In almost every instance, rather than sharing the public asset with Black members of the community, white citizens chose to shut the pools down.¹⁵ My students learned that at the age of 18. I learned it at 42.

What might a conversation look like, particularly in a subject such as ancient philosophy, in which the category of race as we now have it has no analogue, to say nothing of the fact that no less an authority than Aristotle infamously justified the practice of enslavement?¹⁶ It is, ironically, from Aristotle himself that I would like to offer two examples of how an ancient text might form the ground of a conversation about a contemporary issue that centers race and racism, for Aristotle provides us with one of the earliest examples of a systematic exploration of the virtue of justice.

There is, Aristotle suggests, justice in a universal sense—virtue, or human excellence writ large—and justice in a particular sense; and this latter kind of justice itself is subdivided into two kinds: on the one hand, there is distributive justice, whereby goods, for instance honor, political office, or wealth, are to be distributed among those who have a share in the constitution of a nation or state. On the other hand, there is rectificatory justice or justice in repair, which fixes or amends transactions between persons that have somehow gone wrong, the most obvious example being something like party X defrauds party Y in a business deal and thus has to pay party Y what was stolen from her along with any damages.¹⁷

With this framework in mind, one could easily imagine a classroom conversation in which, to take up distributive justice, debates occur between students who imagine themselves as creators of a new nation, and thus in charge of writing a constitution that distributes rights and privileges, establishes tax burdens, divides out power structures, etc. One might also imagine, to examine rectificatory justice, an exercise in which students take up different positions in something that might look like a civil suit in an American courtroom. No doubt these and other similar exercises have their merits. But in the fall of 2021, when I was teaching Aristotle's theory of justice, I also noticed that, earlier that year, H.R. 40, a bill in the House of Representatives proposing to create a commission to study the possibility and the merits of reparations by the United States government to descendants of persons enslaved, advanced out of committee to the House floor for the first time since it was introduced in 1989.¹⁸ Here was an opportunity for a conversation that, in the past, I might not have noticed, and certainly that I would not have thought myself capable to lead. But I remembered my friend's encouragement. I knew my Aristotle. And it was now, after all, October 2021. 39 years and 11 months old.

A similar opportunity surfaced two years later, when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that almost all race-based affirmative action programs are unconstitutional on the grounds that they violate the

Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.¹⁹ Here again emerged a contemporary issue that centered race and racism, and in this case, one that was deeply personal to my students who had just completed their own college applications in the previous few years. Learning about Aristotle and seeing this case through his eyes would be, for them, neither abstract nor speculative; it would be concrete and specific; it would be real. So, they mastered Aristotle's understanding of justice, applied his theory to the details of this particular case, and then presented their work to the broader campus community in an open forum. Our event was co-sponsored by my college's Office of Multicultural and International Student Programs and the King's College Black Student Union. Attendance, while not overwhelming, was more than expected, and the group conversation afterwards lively but respectful.

In each of these instances, students learned that ancient philosophy is not the same thing as old philosophy. That is, while Aristotle lived and wrote thousands of years ago, his ideas and arguments are not irrelevant, intellectual relics that philosophy professors insist on dusting off each semester for their students to feign academic admiration and proffer pretentious praise for the sake of a high grade before walking out of the classroom and instantly resuming their absorption in what their favorite TikTok influencer has to say about the present state of the world. No: Aristotle's arguments constitute the very essence of so much of our contemporary justice discourse and thus provide an indispensable pedagogical lens through which to substantively engage peers, and even to assess oneself. Indeed, at the beginning of this unit, students were asked to write down their opinion about affirmative action prior to reading any of Aristotle's arguments or the text of the Supreme Court's opinions. After the presentation, they were asked to both reexamine their initial opinion through Aristotle's eyes, and then to respond to his critique, stating whether or not they agreed with the Aristotelian assessment of their original position. They thus took up the ancient philosophical art of argument analysis that is never totally divorced from self-critique.

More pointedly for our purposes here, my students took up the challenge of a conversation centered around race and racism in a way that taught them something that perhaps they did not know before—the political history of reparations movements or the legal history of affirmative action jurisprudence—at the same time as they developed a kind of ethics of dialogue not unlike the one Plato cultivated in his Academy in the mid-fourth century BCE, in which students disagreed and faced controversy, but did so together, paradoxically offering reasons for their own point of view while also transcending it.²⁰ They practiced dialogue, in other words, and thus underwent transformation that led them not always—or even frequently—to agreement, though it did hold them in community. My students thus learned not just information, but a language for thoughtfully engaging these topics at the same time as they began to develop an ethos of intellectual relationship, a habitual comportment for being a serious interlocutor in a

conversation about race and racism. They did not, as Aristotle might have said, simply say the virtuous thing; they began to become more virtuous people.

What were my students' personal responses to these assignments? I offer two accounts from former students who gave me permission to report their thoughts.²¹ My first student provides a comprehensive overview, saying that, through this exercise:

I've understood the range of opinions, from those advocating for affirmative action to address historical injustices and promote diversity to others expressing concerns about fairness and a merit-based system. Discussing this topic prompted me to confront historical and structural inequalities, which fostered empathy and understanding of the varied lived experiences of individuals affected by systemic discrimination and disadvantage.

We can see here the way my student astutely lays out the interplay between learning content—different, often conflicting opinions and perspectives—and developing character virtues like empathy that are fundamental to reasoned discourse of any kind. I would like to add that, ideally, the various lived experiences of which this student speaks would have been reported more frequently in the first person, rather than in a textbook or scholarly article, although the demographics of my institution render this challenging: 71% white, 6% Black or African American.²²

My second student offers a revealing account of her experience, saying:

As a white student that grew up in a mostly white, rural area, race has always been presented to me as a "sensitive subject," or as something that should simply be avoided in conversation if possible. As I have grown older, and entered a more diverse college atmosphere, I have realized that the reason so many people seem to avoid talking about markers of difference like race, gender, etc. is because of the discomfort these conversations can cause. Enduring this discomfort is how we can break through socially constructed barriers and begin to understand the people around us that are different from what we are familiar with. Having the courage to talk about race and other differences makes us stronger individuals, and more compassionate towards others. It is also important to realize that for so many people, these discussions are part of their everyday lived experiences.

I want to highlight here this student's honesty in speaking the truth of what many white students I am sure feel but may not say: race talk should be avoided at all costs on pain of discomfort, a troubling sentiment for anyone

who dares to reflect on the reality that intellectual growth—like growth of all kinds—is bound up with some kind of struggle, for it is a view that flies in the face of another piece of ancient insight from the Greek tragedian Aeschylus—that wisdom comes through suffering²³—and is a view which suggests that education, that transformative experience of intellectual encounter that draws me forth into dialogical community with others, is great for a credential on a resume, but is in itself, ultimately, undesirable. Perhaps it is for this reason that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously lamented the white moderate, whom he accused of preferring a negative peace that is the absence of tension to a positive peace that is the presence of justice.²⁴

To be able to choose discomfort, or not, as one prefers, which my student gestures toward at the end of the quote, is a privilege accorded only those whose lives do not compel them by the brutal facts of their daily experiences and social situations to take up the pressing matters of race and racism not as classroom questions, but as exigent concerns that weigh heavily with existential concretion, those whose life situations, that is, rarely demand their reflective engagement with any sort of issue that makes them uncomfortable, and thus the sort of student whose education, if it is to be more than a pseudo-intellectual flower picking, demands that they learn not merely to stop and smell the roses, but to notice that the thorns most often prick those who are considered by society unworthy of the gloves of the gardener. If education is to be education, it must challenge us all to exhibit the courage that my students, whatever their backgrounds or perspectives, showed in these assignments. And if those who are lucky enough to receive a college education are to be, as they are in so many cases, tomorrow's leaders of government, industry, and business—to say nothing of those who work in non-profits and NGOs—then we owe it to them and to ourselves and to our world to initiate real conversation, dialogue that involves, as my institution is so fond of saying, transformation of mind and heart,²⁵ remembering always that, as has been said, “the subtle and deadly change of heart that might occur in you would be involved with the realization that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless.” James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.²⁶

**I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers of this article, whose comments, concerns, and criticisms have improved it beyond what I could have generated on my own. I am in your debt, and for those matters that I could not address—whether out of ignorance or incapacity—I offer my apologies.

¹ “How Rare Is It to Have a PhD? Global Stats Explained,” Aara Consultancy, 2025, <https://aaraconsultancy.com/how-rare-is-it-to-have-a-phd-global-stats-explained/>.

² Amongst so many examples, one might mention Socrates inquiring about piety with Euthyphro—who in the dialogue bearing his name is prosecuting his own father for the crime of impiety; about oratory with Gorgias—who in the dialogue bearing his name claims to be able to make students into orators; or even about the

deathlessness or immortality of the soul with his grieving friends in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue in which he is executed by the state as an enemy of the Athenian democracy.

³ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2017), 2–3.

⁴ Tyrone C. Howard and Keara Williams, “Students Want to Talk About Race. Let Them,” *EducationWeek*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-race-still-grips-and-divides-us-your-students-want-to-talk-about-it/2022/02>.

⁵ Jenna Chandler-Ward and Elizabeth Denevi, “White Fragility in Students,” *Teaching While White*, n.d., <https://www.teachingwhilewhite.org/blog/2020/2/6/white-fragility-in-students>.

⁶ Greta Anderson, “Students Disengage From Controversy,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/03/04/college-students-reluctant-discuss-race-politics-classroom-election>.

⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000). See especially chapter two, 71–86.

⁸ Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 132dff.

⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *Non-things* (Medford: Polity, 2022), 43.

¹⁰ See for example her analysis of the accused in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 36–55.

¹¹ Matthew R. Kay, *Not Light, But Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom* (Portsmouth: Stenhouse, 2018), 49.

¹² See Plato, *Apology*, 19b–d.

¹³ *Ibid*, 19e–20c.

¹⁴ See for instance his careful clarification at *Gorgias* 457c–458b concerning whether his interlocutor would accept or even prefer refutation in pursuit of truth as opposed to entrenched debate in pursuit of victory.

¹⁵ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2012), 17–39.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *The Politics*, I.4–7.

¹⁷ Such is my, admittedly, very broad summary of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* V.1–4.

¹⁸ The bill was most recently introduced again by Massachusetts Representative Ayanna Pressley on January 3, 2025. See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/40>.

¹⁹ The principal case, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. vs. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023) was decided along with its companion case, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. vs. University of North Carolina et. al*. Full text available: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/600us1r53_4g15.pdf.

²⁰ Such is the argument of Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002), 64–65.

²¹ Though I have preserved their anonymity, these students know who they are, and I hope will accept my deep gratitude for permitting me to quote them precisely.

²² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the challenging question of how the sorts of exercises described here might work at a more diverse institution. Given that the demographics of every institution at which I have ever taught more or less track that of my current institution, I fear I must disappoint with the no doubt unsatisfactory, but nevertheless honest, admission that I simply do not know, and I think it imprudent to speculate.

²³ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 175ff.

²⁴ The quote is from King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," available online: https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/letter-from-birmingham-jail?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=10688443904&gbraid=0AAAAAD-kVKremBeBbZ5ho1A8hnria5MRr&gclid=Cj0KCQjwjo7DBhCrA-RIIsACWauSknMUPJ2AFZCUDVIyGYfNLdctZpBJ7raQ-LUxCz45oliXrG-aGyJOFUaAmxYEALw_wcB.

²⁵ See the Vision statement of King's College, available online at: <https://www.kings.edu/aboutkings/traditions-mission/index.html>.

²⁶ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 55.