

Lecture V: West on Historicity and the Afro-American Experience

Agenda

First, we will Cover Cornel West's Four Ideal Types or traditions in Afro-American Philosophy.

Second, we will have discussion about the Four Ideal Types and whether they still ring true as historical types.

Third, we will conclude by gesturing at Patricia Hill Collins' essay on intersectionality as a unique strategy in Black Feminism which encompasses some of the elements of the Four Ideal Types.

*Note the following definitions for West's account of the Four Ideal Types:

Modernity: Modernity is the descriptive notion that connotes the historical state of affairs characterized by an abundance of wealth resulting from the industrial and technological revolution and the ensuing cultural isolation and fragmentation due to a disintegration of closely-knit communities and the decline of religious systems. (West, pp.12)

Afro-American Philosophy: Afro-American philosophy is the interpretation of Afro-American history, highlighting the cultural heritage and political struggles, which provides desirable norms that should regulate responses to particular challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans. Afro-American philosophy is the application of the philosophical techniques of interpretation and justification to the Afro-American experience. The particular historical phenomena interpreted and justified by Afro-American philosophy consist of religious doctrines, political ideologies, artistic expressions and unconscious modes of behavior; such phenomena serve as raw ingredients to be utilized by Afro-American philosophy in order to interpret the Afro-American past and defend particular norms within this past. (West, pp.11)

Cornel West's Four Ideal Types

West's main goal in "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience" is to offer a diachronic framework of African-American Philosophy. That is, West aims to show us how African-American thought has developed over time. Tracking that development means paying close

attention to the underlying cultural and political dimensions of African-American life in the U.S. Studying African-American thought as such will help us better understand how African-American thought has entered modernity. Moreover, two concepts that Afro-American philosophy grapples with are self-image and self-determination (West, pp.11)

Vitalist tradition

What is the vitalist's self-image of Afro-Americans (West, pp. 13)?

- Pride
- Self-congratulation
- Heroism

What is the vitalist's response to self-image and self-determination?

- a romanticization of Afro-American culture that conceals the social mobility of an emerging opportunistic Afro-American petit bourgeoisie.
- Afro-American vitalism offers symbols and rituals to the Afro-American masses which are useful for enhancing the social mobility of Afro-American professional and business groups generates cathartic and amorphous feelings of Afro-American pride, self-congratulation and heroism that contain little substance. (West, pp. 18)

Key figures: W.E.B. Du Bois, late Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Joseph Washington, Albert Cleage, Imamu Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle, and Marcus Garvey

Rationalist tradition

What is the rationalist's self-image of Afro-Americans (West, pp.18)?

- Self-hatred, shame and fear
- Afro-Americans are viewed as morbid subhuman monsters
- This tradition posits Afro-American inferiority, not against everyone, but specifically to white Americans

How does the rationalist tradition respond to the challenges of self-image and self-determination?

"The rationalist response to the challenges of self-image and self-determination is this: a rejection of Afro-American culture and total assimilation into American society. It assumes

that the universal must wipe clean all particulars, that cosmopolitan society erases all provincialities.” (West, pp.20).

Key figures: E. Franklin Frazier

Existentialist tradition

What is the existentialist’s self-image of Afro-Americans (West, pp. 20)?

- Promotes a self-image of both confinement and creativity, restriction and revolt.
- Encompasses a highly individualistic rebellion of Afro-Americans who are marginal to, or exist on the edges of, Afro-American culture and see little use in assimilating into the American mainstream.
- Expresses a critical disposition toward Afro-American culture and American society.”

How does the existentialist tradition respond to the challenges of self-image and self-determination?

- *By candidly accepting the personal marginality to both Afro-American culture and American society plus moral sermonizing to all Americans.*
- The basic concern of this tradition is to loosen the constraints on individuality in Afro-American life.
- Does not provide acute observations on political struggle.
- The Afro-American existentialist tradition is parasitic in that its numbers accept the self-image found in the rationalist or humanist camps.
- Is an important response because it grapples with a personal torment endemic to modernity
- Endorses marginality as an impetus for increasing creativity in the face self-image and self-determination

Key figures: James Baldwin, Sutton Grigs, Charles Chesnutt, Nella Larson, Rudolph Fisher, Richard Wright, and Wallace Thurman

Humanist Tradition

What is the humanist self-image of Afro-Americans? (West, pp. 24)

- The humanist self-image of Afro-Americans is one neither of heroic superhumans untouched by the experience of oppression nor of pathetic subhumans devoid of a supportive culture.
- Afro-Americans are viewed as human beings.
- This tradition does not romanticize or reject Afro-American culture; instead, it accepts this culture for what it is, the expression of an oppressed human community imposing its distinctive form of order on an existential chaos, explaining its political predicament, preserving its self-respect, and projecting its own special hopes for the future.

How does the humanist tradition respond to the challenges of self-image and self-determination (West, pp. 27)?

- promoting “an unconstrained individuality strengthened by an honest encounter with the Afro-American past and the expansion of democratic control over the major institutions that regulate lives in America and abroad.”
- Contrasts sharply with the vitalist and rationalist traditions. It neither romanticizes nor rejects Afro-American culture;
- Avoids the self-serving pursuit of status, wealth and prestige.
- Provides a cultural springboard useful in facing the ever-present issue of self-identity for Afro-Americans and joins their political struggle to other progressive elements in American society.

Key figures: Zora Neale Hurston, Scott Joplin, Bessie Smith, Louie Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, later Du Bois, post Mecca Malcolm X, later Imamu Baraka, and Angela Davis