

**Cornel West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience,"  
*The Philosophical Forum* 9 (2/3) (Winter-Spring 1977-78), 117-148.**

How does philosophy relate to the Afro-American experience? This question arises primarily because of an antipathy to the ahistorical character of contemporary philosophy and the paucity of illuminating diachronic studies of the Afro-American experience.<sup>1</sup> I will try to show that certain philosophical techniques, derived from a particular conception of philosophy, can contribute to our understanding of the Afro-American experience. For lack of a better name, I shall call the application of these techniques to this experience, Afro-American philosophy. I will examine historical sources of these techniques and explore the way in which they underscore the feasibility of an Afro-American philosophy. Finally, I will attempt to show what results such a philosophy should yield.

The philosophical techniques requisite for an Afro-American philosophy must be derived from a lucid and credible conception of philosophy. The search for such a conception requires us to engage in a metaphilosophical discourse, in philosophical reflections on philosophy. The most impressive metaphilosophical formulations of our age which express displeasure with the ahistorical character of modern philosophy are those of Martin Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein and John Dewey.<sup>2</sup> Although the interests and reflections of these thinkers widely diverge they point to one

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<sup>1</sup> I understand a diachronic study to be one that attempts to deal with a phenomenon as it changes over time; it contains a schema that sheds light on human thought and behavior over various historical periods. In contrast, a synchronic study is concerned with the complex of events within a specific time period. The most exciting Afro-American historiography being done focuses on the period of slavery. Stanley Elkins, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, John Blassingame and others have provided thought-provoking synchronic studies of this period, but few historians have tried to go beyond this era-bound approach and thereby broaden our understanding of the Afro-American experience.

<sup>2</sup> In the following exposition of metaphilosophy, I follow closely the brilliant work of Prof. Richard Rorty of Princeton University. Most of this work remains unpublished. I am confident his writings on metaphilosophical issues will be of paramount importance for thinkers in the future. A small taste of his views can be acquired from his article, "Keeping Philosophy Pure," *The Yale Review* (Spring, 1976), Vol. LXV, No. 3, pp. 336–56.

idea essential for an Afro-American philosophy: a critical attitude toward the Cartesian philosophical world-view. The Cartesian Weltanschauung is the foundation of modern philosophy.

Briefly, the Cartesian perspective categorically distinguishes homo sapiens from the rest of the animal kingdom; posits the process of knowing as qualitatively different from all other human activities; claims mental entities, such as beliefs, desires and intentions, are separate from yet related to physical actions; and conceives language and thoughts as systems of representations which somehow “correspond” to the world.<sup>3</sup> This Cartesian picture—the first modern philosophical portrait—presents the perennial conundrums of contemporary philosophy, namely, the metaphysical nature of man, necessary truth, freedom of the will, the mind-body schism and the relation between ideas and objects, words and things. Despite gallant attempts to dissolve these problems into psychology (Hume), history (Marx) and culture (Nietzsche), the Cartesian tradition persists into the twentieth century.

Cartesians postulate the absolute autonomy of philosophy. They presuppose that there is a distinct set of philosophical problems independent of culture, society and history. For them, philosophy stands outside the various conventions on which people base their social practices and transcends the cultural heritages and political struggles of people. If the Cartesian viewpoint is the only valid philosophical stance, then the idea of an Afro-American philosophy would be ludicrous.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The idea that Descartes held a correspondence theory of truth recently has come under attack by Harry Frankfurt in his fascinating work, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (New York, 1970). This book indeed has infused new blood into Cartesian studies, but it is, I believe, wrong. For a convincing defense of the traditional view of Descartes, see Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (New York, 1968), esp. chapters five and eight.

<sup>4</sup> By inadvertently presupposing the Cartesian viewpoint, some Afro-American philosophers, searching for something distinctly black and philosophical, engage in discussions about pseudo-issues, such as black epistemology, black ontology or black conceptions of time and space. This approach merely adopts the Cartesian categories and tries to fill them with “black” content. I believe it is confused, misguided, and will prove to be unproductive.

Martin Heidegger launched the first major attack on Cartesian thought within the Continental tradition in his monumental work, *Being and Time* (1927). The task of philosophy, Heidegger suggests, is not to ascertain indubitable claims about the self and world, but rather to provide an interpretation of what it means for human beings to be.<sup>5</sup> He reconstructs Husserl's phenomenological method—a tool for conceptual description and interpretation—and applies it to the *Dasein* (Being) of the existing, thinking self.

For Heidegger, the preeminence of the Cartesian perspective, the predominance of epistemology in modern philosophy, is but a stage, an unfortunate one, in humankind's attitude toward *Dasein*.<sup>6</sup> This stage begins with Descartes, culminates in Kant and ends with Nietzsche; it originates with Cartesian gaiety about philosophical methodology and terminates in the grotesque, yet often alluring, Nietzschean vision. Heidegger claims the Cartesian viewpoint ultimately produces a scientific positivism that views any systematic analysis of *Dasein* meaningless and fanciful. Besides criticizing the positivist doctrine that results from Cartesianism, Heidegger also rejects Cartesian viewpoints within the hermeneutic tradition of philosophy. Manifest in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, the Cartesian hermeneutic tradition claims that the understanding (*subtilitas intelligendi*) of a text, history or *Dasein* is distinct from its interpretation (*subtilitas explicandi*). Understanding refers to real meaning; interpretation to mere interpreted

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<sup>5</sup> For Heidegger's contrast between the Cartesian perspective and his own, see *Being and Time* (New York, 1962), trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, the section entitled, "A Contrast Between Our Analysis of Worldhood and Descartes' Interpretation of the World," pp. 122–34.

<sup>6</sup> In his famous essay, "The Overcoming of Metaphysics," Heidegger states, "the modern form of ontology is transcendental philosophy, which itself changes into theory of knowledge" found in *The End of Philosophy* (New York, 1973), p. 88. His comments echo the words of Nietzsche, who is for Heidegger the last Western metaphysician, "philosophy reduced to theory of knowledge ... is philosophy at its last gasp, an end, an agony, something that arouses pity." Quoted R. J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche* (London, 1973), p. 166.

meaning. The Cartesian viewpoint in hermeneutics posits an unchanging meaning of a text, history or *Dasein* that is sharable owing to its reproducibility; this sharing consists of an interpreted meaning correctly corresponding to the real meaning. Correct correspondence assures the objectivity and validity of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger refuses to accept the traditional distinction between understanding and interpretation in Cartesian hermeneutics. He believes this quest for certainty is misguided; it attempts to overcome the historical and personal limitations of human interpretation. These limitations take the form of the inherent and inevitable circularity of interpretation.

Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted.<sup>8</sup>

For example, when interpreting a text, history or *Dasein*, we can only appeal to other interpretations we presently understand as the basis for our own interpretation. This circularity is not a vicious one because it continually provides new meaning and novel insights, while acknowledging the limits of who and what we are.

Heidegger claims that philosophical interpretation is an activity of understanding which makes explicit what implicitly people are. A successful interpretation gives meaning to what is

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<sup>7</sup> The Schleiermacher-Dilthey view is merely a hermeneutic version of the Cartesian correspondence theory of truth. It is most clearly presented in the recent work of Eric Hirsch. This theory can be characterized as persons trapped in a veil of ideas; they get in touch with reality only by mental representations (analogous to interpreted meanings) correctly corresponding to external objects (real meanings, such as authorial intentions). Such a theory of truth is obsessed with objectivity because it is forever harassed by skepticism; that is, we can always question the correctness of the correspondence. This skepticism reaches its zenith in the writings of Bishop Berkeley and David Hume. Kant tries to undercut it by granting agnosticism of reality, yet positing an inescapable synthetic machinery that manufactures the raw manifold of intuitions into concepts which impose rational order on the phenomenal world. He sacrifices our knowledge of reality in order to preserve objectivity. Cartesian thinkers, like their Master, want both.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 194.

originally present in an obscure, confused form. Every interpretation is grounded in a fore-having (*Vorhabe*), a fore-sight (*Vorsicht*) and a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). It is always grounded in something we have, see and grasp prior to the act of interpretation; it is never free of presuppositions. In other words, all interpretative activity is rooted in historical situations and formulated in terms of a particular tradition, perspective and prejudice, owing to each individual's engagement in the world and attempt to project possibilities for the future.<sup>9</sup> Heidegger's metaphilosophical insight is: *Philosophy is the hermeneutic analysis that interprets what it means to be for personal selves who remember a past, anticipate a future and decide in the present.*

Afro-American philosophy appropriates from Heidegger the notion of philosophy as interpretation of what it means to be for people who, as a result of active engagement in the world, reconstruct their past, make choices in the present and envision possibilities for the future. Yet Heidegger's conception of philosophy is inadequate. His understanding of the “historicality” (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of *Dasein*, or the way in which historical circumstances influence individuals' choices in the present, is unsatisfactory. His constitutive categories of “historicality”, namely, fate, destiny and heritage, fail to incorporate the current perceptions of the historical forces which constrain human activity.<sup>10</sup>

For Heidegger, fate is the crucial category of the “historicality” of *Dasein*. It is an awareness of each individual's limited possibilities, of their own finitude. Destiny is an extension of fate to the level of groups, nations and humankind. Heritage is the awareness of tradition as the central

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<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of Heidegger's students, has developed this viewpoint much further in his monumental work, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), translation edited by Garrett Barden and John Cumming from the second edition. For his discussion of Heidegger's insights, the Cartesian and Enlightenment attacks on prejudice and tradition, and his own notion of the “fusing of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*), see pp. 235–74.

<sup>10</sup> For Heidegger's much too brief discussion of these notions, see *Being and Time*, section 74, pp. 434–9.

determining factor in the concept of self. Yet, as the young Marcuse noted, these categories ignore crucial historical forces e.g. social position within the mode of production, racist and sexist constraints, that significantly shape and mold the kind of choices available to people.<sup>11</sup>

Heidegger overlooks these vital historical forces because he views history in personal terms, as mere “stretchedness” (*Erstrecktheit*) extending through time. This conception of history neglects the social and political relations between people; it ignores their communal life, past and present. Calvin Schrag perceptively observes,

Heidegger neglects, as do most existentialist thinkers, the community of selves with their common social memory which is the very stuff out of which history is made. To be sure, for Heidegger, being-in-the-world is always being-with-others, but it is the radically isolated *Dasein* who determines the significance of this communal world for his personal existence. The context of historical meaning arises not from the interdependent experiences and reflections of a community of selves, but from the individual projects of a solitary *Dasein* who is concerned for his authentic existence.<sup>12</sup>

Afro-American philosophy rejects Heidegger's personalistic conception of history. The later Wittgenstein goes beyond Heidegger by investigating, in detail, various linguistic practices and illustrating how they are linked to, or constitute the basis of, particular forms of life (*Lebensformen*) or cultures. His philosophy becomes the description of the multi-faceted dimensions of language within distinct cultures.

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<sup>11</sup> The young Marcuse's critique of Heidegger is found in his first published article, “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism” which appeared in the German periodical, *Philosophische Hefte* I, 1 (1928). Martin Jay summarizes this article in his book, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, 1973), pp. 71–3.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin O. Schrag, “Phenomenology, Ontology and History in the Philosophy of Heidegger” in *Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph J. Kocelmans (Garden City, 1967), p. 293.

Wittgenstein believes this descriptive activity is dispensable; philosophy is mere therapy for those still captured by the Cartesian picture of the world (“Philosophy is a disease of which it itself is the cure”). The endless insoluble philosophical problems that bewilder philosophers cannot be solved within the Cartesian framework and they dissolve when this framework is discarded. Any attempt to replace it with a new philosophical perspective is symptomatic of the need to keep philosophy autonomous, to keep it pure.

According to Wittgenstein, philosophy has been inextricably linked to a notion of necessity. Philosophers have searched for the immutable, invariable and unquestionable. They have claimed that necessity derives from the essence of things (e.g. Plato, Aristotle), the structure of our minds (e.g. Kant, Hegel), the structure of history (e.g. Spencer, Marx) and language (some linguistic philosophers and structuralist thinkers). The later Wittgenstein tries to show that the very notion of necessity is anthropocentric: necessity rests upon the contingencies of social practice. His linguistic naturalism (or conventionalism) claims that the meaning of words in our language (or norms in culture, values in society) are linked not to abstract essences or inscrutable mental phenomena, but rather to the use we give them in particular language-games we create, modify and accept. David Pears, in his notable book on Wittgenstein, succinctly states,

It is Wittgenstein's later doctrine that outside human thought and speech there are no independent, objective points of support, and meaning and necessity are preserved only in the linguistic practices which embody them. They are safe only because the practices gain a certain stability from rules. But even the rules do not provide a fixed point of reference, because they always

allow divergent interpretations. What really gives the practices their stability is that we agree in our interpretations of the rules.<sup>13</sup>

Wittgenstein suggests that since necessity derives from human agreement on such rules and their interpretations, autonomous philosophy vanishes.<sup>14</sup> He equates this end of Cartesian philosophy with the end of philosophy *per se*. His own philosophical works, he claims, undermine the Cartesian picture of the world. Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical insight is: *Philosophy is the detailed description of linguistic [social] practices within distinct cultural ways of life.*

Despite obvious differences, Wittgenstein and Heidegger are kindred spirits. Both view philosophy as a move from the obscure to the obvious, rather than from doubt to certainty. Both attempt to discover the human conventions concealed by the Cartesian perspective, to decipher the Cartesian hieroglyphics that promote philosophical deceptions. For both thinkers, philosophy is an interpretative activity which renders the complex simple, the opaque clear and the strange familiar yet, paradoxically, each believes only the courageous will be able to accept the relatively simple truths revealed by their interpretations. To them, all philosophizing requires resolute fearlessness, fortitude and ultimately a change in living and perceiving. Afro-American philosophy subscribes to this approach.

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<sup>13</sup> David Pears, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (New York, 1969), p. 179. Pears' book is a mini-classic on this enigmatic philosopher.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that trenchant critiques of the notion of necessity within the philosophical tradition of the West leave philosophers with little subject-matter. For example, Hume's rejection of necessary causal inferences elevates the role of imagination in thought and custom and habit in behavior: it results in a psychological naturalism and an embryonic sociology of knowledge. W. V. O. Quine's repudiation of necessary true statements yields a behavioristic criterion (of assent or dissent to similar stimuli) for a grounding of epistemological validity and requires a holism that hints at a dynamic historicism (à la Kuhn and Feyerabend). For Hume's arguments, see his magnificent work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, 1968), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Part III, Section XIV, entitled "Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion", pp. 155–72. For Quine's criticisms of analyticity, see his widely influential essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in his *From a Logical Point of View* (New York, 1961), pp. 20–46.



Afro-American philosophy embodies Wittgenstein's stress on the cultural and social practices of people; it is concerned not only with the life-meaning of individuals but also the way such meaning is shaped by the cultural and social practices of a particular community. Yet Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy is incomplete. It lacks a normative component. His suspicion of any justification for norms allows him to "stop doing philosophy" more easily than most of us. It is no accident that his moral thought offers common yet unoriginal ideas derived from Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, e.g. the good life is one patterned after the historical examples of religious figures.<sup>15</sup> As to why this life is better than others, he remains silent.

John Dewey's metaphilosophical views serve, for our purposes, as a form of synthesis and corrective for those of Heidegger and Wittgenstein.<sup>16</sup> He recognizes that the Cartesian picture of the world rests upon specific historical circumstances e.g. the rise of science, the need for methodological purity in philosophy, the advent of capitalist production, which fall within a certain epoch of humankind's development. He acknowledges that an anthropocentric critique of Cartesian thought breaks down traditional distinctions between philosophy and science, art and science, morality and science. Philosophy is inextricably bound to culture, society and history.

For Dewey, the idea of an autonomous philosophy is culturally outmoded. It must submit to the fate of its first cousin, theology. Theology was once an autonomous discipline with its own distinct set of problems, now most of these problems lie at the mercy of psychology, sociology,

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<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein's ethical views are clearly presented and elaborately discussed by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin in their provocative book, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973), Chapter 6.

<sup>16</sup> I have in mind his formulations in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, 1948).

history and anthropology. This is the path Cartesian philosophy (and its modern variants) must follow.

But the normative function of philosophy remains. Philosophy becomes the critical expression of a culture, the critical thought of a society, the critical component of a discipline. It no longer contains delusions of autonomy nor illusions of disappearance. The historical hermeneutics of Heidegger and the cultural descriptions in Wittgenstein are combined with Dewey's pragmatic orientation. Dewey's metaphilosophical insight is: *Philosophy is the interpretation of a people's past for the purpose of solving specific problems presently confronting the cultural way of life from which the people come.* For Dewey, philosophy is critical in that it constantly questions tacit assumptions and unarticulated presuppositions of previous interpretations of the past; it scrutinizes the norms these interpretations endorse, the solutions they offer and the self-images they foster.

From the metaphilosophical insights of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey, I shall define Afro-American philosophy in this way: *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.*<sup>17</sup> Afro-American philosophy is the application of the philosophical techniques of interpretation and justification to

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<sup>17</sup> A brief methodological note. This philosophical inquiry into history should be distinguished from the history of ideas, history of philosophy and intellectual history. The history of ideas is concerned exclusively with concepts explicitly articulated by recognized thinkers; the objects of this discipline are formal ideas. The history of philosophy is the study of concepts or conceptual systems demonstratively presented by thinkers in response to distinctly philosophical problems as defined by present philosophical traditions. Intellectual history includes the history of ideas, history of philosophy plus the unformulated opinions, silent assumptions and inarticulated beliefs of people; the objects of this discipline are the relations between various sets of notions and the cultural way of life from which they emerge. A philosophical inquiry into history utilizes various aspects of historical phenomena in order to unearth, reject and endorse norms of existential and political dilemmas currently besetting a cultural way of life. For useful discussions of these distinctions, see Leonard Krieger, "The Autonomy of Intellectual History," *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, (Oct.-Dec., 1973), Vol. XXXIV, No. 4 and Maurice Mandelbaum, "The History of Ideas, Intellectual History and History of Philosophy," *History and Theory*, 5 (1965).

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.

The two basic challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans are those of self-image and self-determination. The former is the perennial human attempt to define who and what one is, the sempiternal issue of self-identity; the latter is the political struggle to gain significant control over the major institutions that regulate people's lives. These challenges are abstractly distinguishable, yet concretely inseparable. In other words, culture and politics must always be viewed in close relation to each other.<sup>18</sup>

The major function of Afro-American philosophy is to reshape the contours of Afro-American history and provide a new self-understanding of the Afro-American experience which suggests desirable guidelines for action in the present.<sup>19</sup> Afro-American philosophy attempts to make theoretically explicit what is implicit in Afro-American history to describe and demystify the cultural

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<sup>18</sup> A particular conception of the Afro-American self-image deeply affects the political strategy of Afro-American self-determinism. Yet we must not assume a priori that certain correlations necessarily hold, such as that a positive self-image will always accompany the acquisition of power, or a negative self-image the absence of power. Afro-American philosophy must preserve the delicate symbiotic relation between culture and politics without resorting to a simplistic and all too often incorrect reductionism.

<sup>19</sup> Based on my conception of Afro-American philosophy, there have been few conscious instances of it. Of course, there have been Afro-American philosophers, but, like most Afro-American intellectuals, they have exerted their energies either trying to convince the black middle class that the world of ideas should be taken seriously, serving as an ideologue for a particular political or cultural movement, or attempting to gain acceptance in the predominately white Academy. All three activities are essential for a potent intelligentsia, but leave little time for reflecting upon the basic assumptions of the theoretical frameworks wherein thinkers speculate. Effective propagandists and insecure academicians rarely question basic frameworks or ask fundamental questions with seriousness.

and social practices in this history and offer certain solutions to urgent problems besetting Afro-Americans.

Modernity is a central notion in my interpretation of the Afro-American past. I shall define it in this way: *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.* Afro-American history chronicles the prolongation of the Afro-American entrance into the corridors of modernity; the long overdue reaping of the harvest they helped cultivate, the seizing of opportunities previously closed, and the bruising encounter with the emptiness, sterility and hypocrisy of contemporary life.

When Afro-Americans are viewed as passive objects of history, Afro-American history is a record of the exclusion of a distinct racial group from the economic benefits and cultural dilemmas of modernity. Politically, this exclusion has meant white ownership of Afro-American persons, possessions and progeny; severe discrimination reinforced by naked violence within a nascent industrial capitalist order; and urban enclaves of unskilled unemployables and semi-skilled workers within a liberal corporate capitalist regime. Culturally, this has meant continual Afro-American degradation and ceaseless attempts to undermine Afro-American self-esteem.

When Afro-Americans are viewed as active subjects of history, Afro-American history becomes the story of gallantly persistent struggle, of a disparate racial group fighting to enter modernity on its own terms. Politically, this struggle consists of prudential acquiescence plus courageous revolt against white paternalism; institution-building and violent rebellion within the

segregated social relations of industrial capitalism; and cautious reformist strategies within the integrated social relations of “post-industrial” capitalism. Culturally, this has meant the maintenance of self-respect in the face of pervasive denigration.

I will attempt to order and organize some significant aspects of the Afro-American past by delineating four ideal-types which embody distinct Afro-American historical traditions of thought and behavior. These categories incorporate abstract elements of Afro-American historical reality; they are, however, derived from an empirical examination of this reality. Needless to say, they rarely appear empirically in their pure, conceptual form, but may serve as heuristic tools to confer intelligibility on Afro-American history and provide an understanding of this history by revealing its internal rationality.

The four theoretical constructs to be considered are the vitalist, rationalist, existentialist and humanist traditions in Afro-American history.<sup>20</sup> I shall try to stipulate clear definitions of these traditions so they will not be automatically associated with their previously established meanings within traditional historiography.

*The Afro-American vitalist tradition lauds the uniqueness of Afro-American culture and personality.* It claims a *sui generis* status for Afro-American life in regard to form and content. It stresses what qualitatively distinguishes Afro-Americans from the rest of humanity, especially what

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<sup>20</sup> These four ideal-types represent the basic responses of any group, community or nation entering modernity. In the American context, they are found among emerging Irish, Italian, Polish, Jewish, et al. communities beginning to interact with the dominant WASP culture and society. In the European context, these traditions are salient in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Germany, late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia, early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spain, etc. They are presently forming in Third World countries. The best recent studies on this problematic of groups entering modernity are those of John Cuddihy on Jewish intellectuals, Rockwell Gray on Spanish thinkers (esp. Ortega y Gasset) and Elaine Showalter on British women novelists. For samples of their work, see Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Straus, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York, 1974). Rockwell Gray, “Ortega y Gasset and Modern Culture”, *Salmagundi* (Fall, 1976), No. 35, pp. 6–41. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, 1977).

sets them apart from white Americans. This tradition contains two types: strong vitalism and weak vitalism. Strong vitalism makes ontological claims about Afro-American superiority; Afro-Americans stand above other racial groups because of their genetic makeup, divine chosenness or innate endowments. Weak vitalism makes sociological claims about Afro-American superiority; Afro-Americans stand above other racial groups because of certain values, modes of behavior or gifts acquired from their endurance of political oppression, social degradation and economic exploitation.

*The Afro-American rationalist tradition considers Afro-American culture and personality to be pathological.* It rejects any idea of an independent, self-supportive Afro-American culture. It stresses the inability of Afro-Americans to create adequate coping devices to alleviate the enormous pressures caused by their dire condition. This tradition also contains two types: strong rationalism and weak rationalism. Strong rationalism makes ontological claims about Afro-American inferiority; Afro-Americans stand below other racial groups because of their genetic makeup, divine rejection or innate deficiency. Weak rationalism makes sociological claims about Afro-American inferiority; Afro-Americans stand below other racial groups because of certain values, modes of behavior or defects acquired from their endurance of political oppression, social degradation and economic exploitation.

*The Afro-American existentialist tradition posits Afro-American culture to be restrictive, constraining and confining.* It emphasizes the suppression of individuality, eccentricity and nonconformity within Afro-American culture. This tradition is parasitic in that it rests upon either the rationalistic or humanist traditions.

*The Afro-American humanist tradition extolls the distinctiveness of Afro-American culture and personality.* It accents the universal human content of Afro-American cultural forms. It makes no ontological or sociological claims about Afro-American superiority or inferiority, Rather it focuses on the ways in which creative Afro-American cultural modes of expression embody themes and motifs analogous to the vigorous cultural forms of other racial, ethnic or national groups. This tradition affirms Afro-American membership in the human race, not above or below it.

My conception of these four traditions in Afro-American thought and behavior assumes that culture is more fundamental than politics in regard to Afro-American self-understanding. It presupposes that Afro-American cultural perceptions provide a broader and richer framework for understanding the Afro-American experience than political perceptions. As noted earlier, culture and politics are inseparable, but as I believe Antonio Gramsci has shown, any political consciousness of an oppressed group is shaped and molded by the group's cultural resources and resiliency as perceived by individuals therein.<sup>21</sup> So the extent to which the resources and resiliency are romanticized, rejected or accepted will deeply influence the kind of political consciousness individuals possess.

These four traditions of thought and behavior in Afro-American history can serve as guides for understanding Afro-American culture and politics. They shall represent distinct Afro-American responses to the challenges of self-image and self-determination; they will also be the alternatives from which we choose a desirable response to these challenges.

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<sup>21</sup> Gramsci defends this viewpoint in his important essay, "Problems of Marxism" in his *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London, 1971).

### *The Vitalist Tradition*

The self-image of Afro-Americans in the vitalist tradition (both types) is one of pride, self-congratulation and often heroism. Afro-Americans are considered to be more humane, meek, kind, creative, spontaneous or nonviolent than members of other racial groups; less malicious, mendacious, belligerent, bellicose or avaricious. This tradition posits Afro-American superiority, not over all others, but specifically over white Americans.

The strong vitalist tradition in Afro-American history does not appear until the rise of a secular Afro-American intelligentsia. The early religious Afro-American intellectuals, though vehemently opposed to black oppression and the doctrine of white supremacy, did not subscribe to any form of strong vitalism. Despite the fierce fight continually waged for Afro-American enhancement they refused to make any ontological claims about Afro-American superiority, primarily because of inhibitory, deep, Christian roots.

The first major formulation of strong vitalism in Afro-American thought appears in the “germ” theory of New England-born, Harvard-trained W. E. B. Du Bois. Ironically, he borrowed this theory from his teacher at Harvard, Albert Bushnell Hart, who used it to support Teutonic (Anglo-Saxon) superiority. This theory maintains that each race possesses its own “race idea and race spirit” embodying its unique gift to humanity. Du Bois writes,

At the same time the spiritual and physical differences of race groups which constituted the nations became deep and decisive. The English nation stood for constitutional liberty and commercial freedom; the German nation for science and philosophy; the romance nations stood for literature and art, and the other race groups are striving, each in its own way, to develop for



civilization its particular message, its particular ideal ... Manifestly some of the great races today—particularly the Negro race—have not as yet given to civilization which they are capable of giving.<sup>22</sup> And what is this message? In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924), he suggests it is essentially that of meekness, joviality and humility manifest in the Afro-American gift of spirit. His essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, found in the earlier work, rhetorically asks, Will America be poorer if she replace her brutal dyspeptic blundering with light-hearted but determined Negro humility? or her coarse and cruel wit with loving jovial good-humor? or her vulgar music with the soul of the Sorrow Songs?<sup>23</sup>

He ends the latter work casting “the sense of meekness and humility” of Afro-Americans against the white man's “contempt, lawlessness and lynching” for domination of the emerging American spirit. The uniqueness of Afro-Americans is even more explicitly endorsed when he writes, Negroes differ from whites in their inherent genius and stages of development.<sup>24</sup> Under the influence of Franz Boas and Marxism, Du Bois abandons the “germ” theory, yet he planted and nurtured its seed long enough for the strong vitalist tradition to establish a continued presence in Afro-American thought and behavior.

James Weldon Johnson gives the strong vitalist tradition new life with his notion of the unique creativity of Afro-Americans. In the famous preface to his well-known anthology of Afro-

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<sup>22</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races”, *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York, 1971), Vol. One, ed. Julius Lester, p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, 1961), intro. Saunders Redding, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> This remark is quoted from S. P. Fullinwider's seminal work, *The Mind and Mood of Black America* (Homewood, 1969), p. 60.

American poetry, he claims that the true greatness of a civilization should be measured by its creative powers in the arts. He then adds,

the Negro has already proved the possession of these powers by being the creator of the only things artistic that have sprung from American soil and have been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products.<sup>25</sup>

He attributes these creative powers to the “racial genius” of Afro-Americans,

us who are warmed by the poetic blood of Africa—old, mysterious Africa, mother of races, rhythmic-beating heart of the world ...<sup>26</sup>

And what does this “racial genius” consist of? Like that of Du Bois, it is a god-given (or Nature-given) spirit revealed in the pietistic, primitive Christianity of rural Afro-Americans.

The majority of literary works during the Harlem Renaissance mark a shift in the strong vitalist tradition. The urban setting and close interaction with alienated white literary figures groping for the vitality of “noble savages” adds new content to Afro-American uniqueness: the primitivism of Afro-Americans manifest in their uninhibited and spontaneous behavior.

In the past decade, the strong vitalist tradition has flourished in the religious doctrine of the Black Muslims under the leadership of the late Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the black theology of Joseph Washington and Albert Cleage, and the Black Arts Movement promoted by Imamu Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle and others. These groups provided ontological justifications for the inhumanity of white Americans, hence Afro-American superiority over these whites. The evidence usually adduced was American history; the conclusion was to deny American (white) values, defy American (white) society and preserve the small dose of humanity left in America.

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<sup>25</sup> *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York, 1922), pp. 9–10.

<sup>26</sup> Manuscript of speech delivered to Washington D.C. branch of the NAACP, 1924, Johnson papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection Yale University Library. Quoted from Fullinwider, *The Mind and Mood of Black America*, p. 89.

The weak vitalist tradition began with the African Methodist Episcopal intelligentsia. The humanity of white people is not denied, but they are relegated to a lower moral status than Afro-Americans. For example, R. R. Wright, a leading intellectual of the A.M.E. Church at the turn of the century writes,

The white man is selfish and the American white man is the most grasping breed of humanity ever made.<sup>27</sup>

Wright concludes that whites, due to their materialist greed and moral self-centeredness, have never understood the Christian message. Only the peaceful loving and forgiving Afro-Americans can instill the spirit of Christianity in the violent, vicious white race.

African Methodism will carry the Christian message of brotherhood to the white man.<sup>28</sup>

The weak vitalist tradition continued with the Garvey Movement of the nineteen twenties. Garvey heralded Afro-American pride, beauty and strength without claiming innate white inferiority. His program of racial purity, black religion (including a black Christ, Mary and God) and Back-to-Africa doctrine was juxtaposed with, for example, the following judgment on white people,

We are not preaching a propaganda of hate against anybody. We love the white man; we love all humanity, because we feel that we cannot live without the other.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Garvey believed white people behaved in a demonic fashion within the existing social order.

I regard the Klan as a better friend of the race than all the groups of hypocritical whites put together. You may call me a Klansman if you will, but potentially, every white man is a

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<sup>27</sup> R. R. Wright, Jr. "African Methodism and the Second Century," *Christian Recorder*, Vol. 64 (April 13, 1916), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Amy Jacques-Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (Kingston, 1963), p. 98.

Klansman, as far as the Negro in competition with whites socially, economically, and politically is concerned, and there is no use lying about it.<sup>30</sup>

The most recent instance of weak vitalism is Martin Luther King's doctrine of nonviolence. This doctrine tends to assume tacitly that Afro-Americans have acquired, as a result of their historical experience, a peculiar capacity to love their enemies, to endure patiently suffering, pain and hardship and thereby “teach the white man how to love” or “cure the white man of his sickness”. King seemed to believe that Afro-Americans possess a unique proclivity for nonviolence, more so than other racial groups, that they have a certain bent toward humility, meekness and forbearance, hence are quite naturally disposed toward nonviolent action. In King's broad overview, God is utilizing Afro-Americans—this community of *caritas* (other-directed love)—to bring about “the blessed community”. He seemed confident his nonviolent movement of predominately Afro-Americans was part of a divine plan. He was the drum major of,

this mighty army of love, and I am sure that the entire world now looks to the Negro in America for leadership in the whole task of building a world without want, without hate, and where all men live together in shared opportunity and brotherhood.<sup>31</sup>

The self-image fostered by the vitalist tradition (both types) is defensive in character and romantic in content. It is a reaction to the doctrine of white supremacy, an attempt to build Afro-American pride and self-worth upon quixotic myths about the past, exaggerated expectations of the present and chiliastic hopes for the future.

This self-image reveals the real roots of the Afro-American vitalist tradition: the rise of the Afro-American petit bourgeoisie. The vitalist claim of Afro-American superiority can be seen as a

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<sup>30</sup> *Black Nationalism in America* (New York, 1970), ed. Bracey, Meier and Rudwick, p. 193

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Mighty Army of Love,” *SCLC Newsletter*, Vol. 2, (Oct.-Nov., 1964), p. 7.

cloak for the repressed self-doubts, fears and anxieties of an emerging Afro-American middle class. It results from the inevitable questioning of personal identity and the belated quest for wealth, status and prestige among the Afro-American *parvenu* petit bourgeoisie caused by interacting with a hostile white (American) society.

In the cultural sphere, Afro-American vitalism was begun by talented Afro-Americans extolling the cultural achievements of the West, searching for Afro-American ones commensurate with those of the West, and ending by conjuring up mythologies that put Afro-American achievements on superior footing with the West. Personal identity becomes cushioned by racial myths of superiority; the search for this identity is motivated primarily by the white opposition. Hence, it is extrinsic, containing no enduring sustenance, potency or authenticity.

In the political sphere, Afro-American vitalism started with ambitious Afro-Americans who pursued wealth, status and prestige in American society, ran up against racist barriers, then returned to the Afro-American world to continue this pursuit, with an acquired hostility toward the society in which they unsuccessfully sought entrance. They amassed wealth, status and prestige in this world ("big fish in a little pond") and concerned themselves with helping other ambitious socially mobile Afro-Americans, sometimes under the banner of anti-whitism, and often at the expense of the Afro-American masses.

The bourgeois roots of the vitalist tradition is most clearly seen in its aims and conceptions of political struggle. Its major form is Afro-American vocation ideology: a calling for Afro-Americans to acknowledge their uniqueness, utilize it to organize and mobilize themselves against the white world, and undermine the inhumanity and hypocrisy of this white world. A cursory examination of

the Afro-American vitalist approach to political struggle substantiates a revised version of Lenin's famous quip: "scratch a vitalist and underneath is a budding bourgeois".

Du Bois's "germ" theory has its political analogue in his doctrine of the Talented Tenth. He promoted both simultaneously. While the Afro-American masses are busy giving the world its meekness, humility and joviality, the Talented Tenth is provided leadership and guidance for these spiritual masses, a leadership and guidance that presupposes the sustained wealth, status and prestige of the Talented Tenth. In other words, the Untalented Ninetieth possess the idealized gift of spirit, while the Talented Tenth acquire the essentials of power, namely education and skills.<sup>32</sup>

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.<sup>33</sup>

James Weldon Johnson's important role in the NAACP (its first black executive secretary) embodies the same relationship, with an integrationist twist: a middle-class approach while idealizing the religious "primitivism" of the Afro American masses.

The literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the Black Arts Movement in the sixties, represent petit bourgeois fascination with the spontaneity of Afro-American proletarian (and lumpenproletarian) life; the first movement remained much less political than the later one. The

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<sup>32</sup> This interpretation puts the famous Du Bois-Washington debate in a slightly different light. Du Bois indeed favors struggling for political rights and a liberal education for the Talented Tenth, while Washington pushes for the acquisition of marketable skills and accumulation of property among Afro-Americans. But, in regard to Afro-American leadership, Washington preserves an important place for skilled workers and entrepreneurs, who have close contact with ordinary black people. For Du Bois, at this stage in his long career, only the educated elite could provide leadership, an elite that easily falls prey to idealization of the Afro-American masses.

<sup>33</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth", *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W.E. B. Du Bois*, p. 385.

Harlem Renaissance writers basically portrayed stereotypical lifestyles with which they were scarcely acquainted; the Black Arts figures promoted so-called “black” values that rest completely outside the cultural framework of most Afro-Americans. Both movements produced mediocre art, romanticized the Afro-American lower class and launched lucrative careers for a few middle-class artists previously excluded from the white (American) world of art.

R. R. Wright's weak vitalist approach culminated in an energetic attempt to organize an Afro-American interest group, an Afro-American political party and an Afro-American voting bloc: early middle-class attempts to utilize Afro-American cohesion to gain entrance to the political mainstream.

The Garvey Movement, after great popular support, resulted in an aborted trip to Africa. The thousands of dollars it acquired from Afro-Americans (mainly from small entrepreneurs) who purchased stocks in Garvey's business concerns, was squandered, through ineptitude and graft. The Black Muslims (under the late Honorable Elijah Muhammad) opted for entrepreneurship in urban centers—a gallant yet hapless attempt to secure a notch within a declining entrepreneurial capitalism and an ever-expanding corporate-dominated economy. The same holds for the “black capitalism” promoted in the past decade by some Black Power advocates.<sup>34</sup>

King's political viewpoint was more candid than the others: it literally proclaimed American middle-class status its goal. After harsh political struggle, the federal government was persuaded to

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<sup>34</sup> An important note should not be overlooked regarding Afro-American nationalist movements in the vitalist tradition, namely their invariable authoritarian and sexist character. These movements e.g. Garvey, Black Muslims, Congress of African People, delegate power from top to bottom within a highly rigid hierarchical structure wherein women are relegated to the lowest runs, the most powerless positions. As Christopher Lasch has suggested, these movements may contain elements of a machismo complex and express assertions of masculinity heretofore ignored. Lasch's insightful essay, “Black Power: Cultural Nationalism as Politics” is in his work, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1969), pp. 117–68.

legitimize this pursuit. Federal legislation removed certain racist barriers e.g. disenfranchisement, segregated housing, which increased possibilities for skilled and educated Afro-Americans to acquire some degree of wealth, status and prestige in American society. Results for the Afro-American poor have been minimal.<sup>35</sup>

*The vitalist response to the challenges of self-image and self-determination is this: 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.<sup>36</sup> It generates cathartic and amorphous feelings of Afro-American pride, self-congratulation and heroism that contain little substance.*

The hypocrisy of Afro-American vitalism is revealed usually *ex post facto*: when bourgeois nationalists, after acquiring some status, prestige and wealth, begin to “outgrow their childish past”, namely begin to interact, commune and even marry the previously “inferior enemy”; and when bourgeois integrationists, after gaining a desired place in American society, remain complacently inert and satisfied in their Promised Land, the coveted suburbs. So the Afro-American vitalist

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<sup>35</sup> Despite ostensible gains during the past decade by the black white collar and stable blue collar working class, the black poor has increased, in numbers and percentage. In the last Government Census (in 1972), the poor and near-poor represented a staggering 42% of all Afro-Americans. See Sar Levitan, William Johnston and Robert Taggart, *Still A Dream* (Cambridge, 1975), Chapter 2, esp. p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Kilson makes this acute observation in his article, “Black Power: Anatomy of a Paradox,” *The Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1968, pp. 30–4. He writes, “Some professionals are adopting a Black Power ideological format not with the intent of preparing themselves for service to self-governing urban black communities but to make themselves more visible to the white establishment, which is not at all adverse to offering such persons good jobs as alternatives to Black Power. The more viable Negro businessmen are also simulating the Black Power phenomenon in this way ... The Black Power advocates have virtually no control over this use of their political style by the professional and business black bourgeoisie, which means the Black Power advocates will eventually lose the payoff potential of nationalist politics. If so ... the Negro lower classes, whose riots legitimize Black Power, will be joined by the Black Power advocates in holding the bag – with nothing in it, save a lot of therapeutic miscellany ...” (p. 34).



tradition (both types) is a stream of thought and behavior in Afro-American history which serves principally as a covert strategy for Afro-American entree into the mainstream of American society. Afro-American philosophy deems the vitalist response undesirable. The romanticization of Afro-American culture is an escape from reality. It fosters cultural stagnation and leaves Afro-Americans vulnerable to insidious manipulation by charismatic figures or socially mobile groups. In other words, it does not enhance the cultural life or ameliorate the socioeconomic conditions of the majority of Afro-Americans.

### *The Rationalist Tradition*

The self-image of Afro-Americans in the rationalist tradition (strong and weak types) is one of 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. Like the vitalist tradition, this stream of thought and behavior in Afro-American history did not appear until the rise of a secular Afro-American intelligentsia. Aside from occasional remarks by Alexander Crummell and Edward Blyden regarding missionary emigrationism, the early religious Afro-American intelligentsia refused to engage in any talk about Afro-American inferiority, primarily because they headed the institutions (Churches) around which Afro-American culture evolved. The unchallenged theoretician of the weak rationalist tradition in Afro-American history is E. Franklin Frazier.<sup>37</sup> The Chicago school of sociology serves as the context in which his brand of weak rationalism flourished. Borrowing from the social theory of W. I. Thomas (especially his work on Polish peasants) and Robert Parks (notably his work on urban class and status conflict), Frazier views

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<sup>37</sup> Fortunately, there are no Afro-American strong rationalists, though there are still a few white ones around e.g. Shockley, Jensen.

the history of Afro-American culture as a series of devastating social shocks—the initial act of enslavement from Africa, the cruel voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, the “peculiar institution” of slavery, the vicious post-emancipation life and the disintegration of folk culture in the cities. In his well-known book, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932), Frazier suggests that the Afro-American culture basically amounts to superstition, ignorance, self-hatred and fear. It emanates from political despair and produces a wholly negative self-image. He hopes it will soon disappear.<sup>38</sup>

The weak rationalist tradition under the aegis of Frazier provided the theoretical framework for legal and political argumentation of civil rights during the past two decades. The message was clear: Afro-Americans have been environmentally created less equal and normal than whites, so only assimilation with whites can break the circle of political oppression and pathological behavior. This message contains the chief aim of political struggle in the Afro-American weak rationalist tradition, an ideology of Afro-American uplift: The only hope for Afro-American enhancement is increased interaction with whites because only assimilation can civilize, refine and modernize Afro-Americans. Frazier makes this point crystal clear,

If the Negro had undertaken to shut himself off from the white culture about him and had sought light from within his experience, he would have remained on the level of barbarism.<sup>39</sup>

Later in life, Frazier began to recognize the belated consequences of his viewpoint. In his scathing critique of the Afro-American middle-class, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1962), he castigates their

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<sup>38</sup> This viewpoint has been extremely influential in American sociological studies on Afro-Americans. For example, Gunnar Myrdal's renowned *An American Dilemma* (1944) states “American Negro culture ... is a distorted development, or an unhealthy condition of American culture” (p. 928). Glazer and Moynihan's first edition of *The Melting Pot* (1963) reads “the Negro is only an American, and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect” (p. 53). And the list goes on and on e.g. Stanley Elkin's Sambo thesis about slave personality in *Slavery* (1959), the Moynihan report on the Afro-American family (1965), Kenneth Clarke's *Dark Ghetto* (1965), et al.

<sup>39</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, “Racial Self-Expression”, *Ebony and Topaz, a Collectionana* (New York, 1927), ed. Charles S. Johnson, p. 120.

aping of white bourgeois society, their fanciful world of status, wealth and prestige, and their inability to take each other seriously as professionals. In a later essay, he advises Afro-American intellectuals to provide positive self-images for black people and don't confuse assimilation with self-effacement.<sup>40</sup> Yet, despite these late attempts that acknowledge the limitations of the weak rationalist tradition, Frazier almost singlehandedly set in motion a stream of Afro-American thought and behavior which remains highly influential today.

Like the vitalist tradition, the rationalist one is a petit bourgeois affair; it promotes a self-image which inheres primarily among an insecure, socially mobile Afro-American middle class (and adopted as true by some misguided white social scientists) and posits this largely negative self-image as the only one for all Afro-Americans. Yet, unlike the vitalist tradition, it does not romanticize Afro-American culture; instead, it deprecates this culture.

*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.

Afro-American philosophy holds the rationalist response to be unacceptable. The wholesale renunciation of Afro-American culture only denigrates Afro-Americans. It deprives them of the autonomous elements of their way of life, the genuine creations of their cultural heritage. The rationalist tradition, like the vitalist one, is a rash reaction against a hostile white society rather than a responsible response to particular challenges. Both traditions represent the peculiar predicament of

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<sup>40</sup> In later life, like most active minds, Frazier makes claims inconsistent with his earlier views and engages in a fruitful exercise of self-criticism. Based on his earlier perspective, it is not surprising the black middle class dangles in a world of make-believe since white society excludes them and they abhor their own culture; Afro-American intellectuals also would be hard put to project positive self-images if Afro-American culture is what the early Frazier suggests it is. For Frazier's later essay on Afro-American intellectuals, see "The Failure of the Negro Intellectual," *Negro Digest*, February 1962.

the Afro-American middle class. Just as the vitalist tradition looks at Afro-American culture and sees no evil, so the rationalist tradition looks and sees no good. The major shortcoming of the latter is that it overlooks the possibility of cultural vitality and poverty-ridden living conditions existing simultaneously in Afro-American life.

### *The Existentialist Tradition*

The Afro-American existentialist tradition promotes a self-image of both confinement and creativity, restriction and revolt. It 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. It expresses a critical disposition toward Afro-American culture and American society.

The early manifestations of Afro-American existentialist thought and behavior were found in the critical attitudes of religious leaders toward their own church members and American society. But the result was rarely personal rebellion against both, owing to the need for conformity and community under severe oppression.

The existentialist tradition appears more fully in the works of Sutton Griggs and Charles Chesnutt. For both, the problematic status of the mulatto—the physically marginal person between Afro-American culture and American society—is central. The authors and their characters maintain a distance and express a denial of Afro-American culture which leaves them uprooted. Their rejection and distrust of American society makes them vindictive.

Griggs and Chesnutt are the first archetypes of Afro-American existentialists: individualistic, alienated, searching for a home. Their talent and imagination lift them above what they conceive to

be the uncouth, vulgar and unrefined Afro-American folk culture, yet this same talent and imagination is denied recognition by whites, hence turned against the white world. In the end, both sought escape from this predicament—Griggs to Africa, Chesnutt (“passing”) into the white world he had earlier assailed.

The existentialist tradition blossoms in the works, and lives, of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher. Both were plagued by the inability to accept themselves and could not find comfort anywhere. Larsen's Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand* (1928), is an attractive well-bred mulatto who seeks to overcome her self-hatred and find herself in a provincial southern Negro college, the urban life of Chicago and Harlem, the cosmopolitan world of Copenhagen and finally the pietistic Christianity of Afro-American rural life. She—Helga (and Larsen)—is an incessant rebel, unable to come to terms with herself in either world, black or white.

Rudolph Fisher, the talented physician-writer, fostered early in life a deep hatred of the white world. He also found it hard to appreciate anything in Afro-American urban life. He praised the spirituals, but refused to acknowledge similar artistic richness in the blues and jazz. The latter are considered secular vulgarizations evolved from the former; the cruel urban environment destroys the pure, religious pathos of Afro-American rural life. Fisher was unable to feel at home in the city. This detachment allowed Fisher to portray Afro-American urban life more honestly than his literary contemporaries during the Harlem Renaissance. He was more conscious than they of the divisions within black city life because they affected him more acutely.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nathan Huggins concurs with this observation in his book, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971), p. 119, where, in discussing Fisher's novel, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), he writes, “Joshua ‘Shine’ Jones, Rudolph Fisher's proletarian hero, has several walls to bring down. There is the barrier of race, of course, which remarkably is the least of his concerns. His resentment is directed primarily against class distinctions and the pretensions of high-toned Negroes. Thus, Fisher wrote

The personal revolt of Wallace Thurman may serve as a turning point in the existentialist tradition. It marks the refusal to escape from self-hatred and shame. Prior to Thurman, Afro-American existentialists imagine heroic self-absorbing events, long for idyllic lifestyles of the rural past, or succumb to resignation. Thurman candidly confronts his negative view of self, and attempts to see something in it that can help him overcome it. Unfortunately, he discovers little to aid him.

This theme is presented, in embryonic form, in his first novel, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929). The jet-black complexion of Emma Lou, his protagonist, forces her to come to terms with who she is. Only a sincere acceptance of her dark skin color, in contrast to the attitudes of both her own culture and white society, leads to personal salvation. In his second novel, *The Infants of the Spring* (1932), Thurman portrays his own predicament and his efforts to get out of it. He parodies the Harlem Renaissance, its phoniness, self-deception and barrenness. He depicts how its praise of primitivism conceals self-effacement; how white patrons encourage literary compromise; how Afro-American pretentiousness hides inferiority complexes. For Thurman, only a Nietzschean *Übermensch* or a Dostoevskian Underground Man can avoid these traps. Salvation lies in self-definition through art created out of no illusions about the self. Yet his self-acceptance precludes any usage of the positive aspects of Afro-American culture as ingredients for art. He creates from a cultural vacuum, from solely personal despair and self-hatred, resulting in an unusually truncated view of life, an extremely limited vision of human experience.

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the only novel of the decade that exposed class antagonisms among Harlem blacks.” See also Robert Bone’s perceptive comments on Fisher’s attempt to bridge the gap between other cleavages e.g. rural vs. urban, artist vs. middle class, West Indian vs. Southern black, in his short stories. Robert Bone, *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginning to the End of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1975), pp. 150–9.

The Afro-American existentialist tradition reaches its zenith in the works and life of Richard Wright. The chief motif that pervades his writings is personal rebellion, against who he is, the culture that nurtures him, the society which rejects him and the cosmos which seems indifferent to his plight. Uprooted from the rural life of Mississippi, disgusted with the black bourgeoisie and predominately Jewish Communists in Chicago and New York, alienated within the cosmopolitan world of Paris and distrustful of emerging African countries, Wright is the marginal man *par excellence*.

Wright tried to create an Afro-American self-image that rests solely upon personal revolt, be it couched in the naturalism of Dreiser or crudely guided by the philosophical existentialism of Sartre or Camus. His revolt was intense, but it never crystallized into any serious talk of concerted action partly because such talk presupposes a community, a set of common values and goals, at which a marginal man like Wright can only sneer.

Wright's attitude toward Afro-American culture was twofold: A conscious embodiment and rejection of it.<sup>42</sup> In his major novel, *Native Son* (1940), Wright linked himself to the Afro-American community by presenting Bigger Thomas, his main character, as a symbol of this community, of its plight and hopes. Bigger gave visibility and recognition to Afro-Americans. Wright's sometimes subtle, and often overt, derogatory remarks about Afro-American culture were integral elements in the exposure of this culture, Wright's own fear, shame and self-hatred, he believed, made him intuitively close to the culture he rejected and rebellious against the society partially responsible for his negative self-image. Wright seemed to think he would always be a part of the culture from which

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<sup>42</sup> My reading of Wright is influenced by Martin Kilson's unpublished paper "Nationalism and Marginality in Black Writers: The Case of Richard Wright."

he sought to escape, and the deeper his repudiation of it, the more tightly he remained tied to it.

Why? Because his own negative self-image, he seemed to believe, only mirrored the self-image found in Afro-American culture. Artistic imagination allowed him (only him!) to overcome the deep scars of oppression. These livid scars became, for Wright (who had escaped from the inferno), the chief sources of his art. Hence, the assertions of being in his fiction take the form of violent acts against his culture, society and world.

The first major critique of Wright's perspective was written by the young James Baldwin. In his influential *Partisan Review* essays, (reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son*), he claims Wright succumbed to the cold, lifeless, abstract categories of social scientists; in short, Wright endorsed the Afro-American self-image found in the rationalist tradition. For Baldwin, such a view overlooks the richness and beauty in Afro-American life. Wright adopts a self-image that distorts Afro-American culture, denies Afro-American humanity. Baldwin concluded his remarks stating,

our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it.<sup>43</sup>

The greatness of Baldwin as a person and the significance of his work as a writer is his candid portrayal of this burdensome acceptance. In his first, and best, work of fiction, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1953), Baldwin discovered that the positive side of Afro-American life is much easier for him to talk about in essays than depict in fiction. When he looked closely into his own life, he saw

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<sup>43</sup> James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes of a Native Son* (New York, 1955), p. 17.



almost precisely what Wright saw—terror, fear and self-hatred.<sup>44</sup> These qualities evolved from a rigid, fundamentalist Christian home in the heart of urban America—Harlem.

Baldwin's protagonist, John Grimes, has an immense fear of God, his father (Gabriel) and white society. He is plagued by a cosmic terror. He feels trapped. If he revolts against his Superegos, he fears perdition; if he submits, he suffers frustration. The only way out is through a rebellious act of imagination.

Unlike Wright, Baldwin's rebellion is not for deeper marginality or further isolation. Instead, his is a search for community, a community of love and tolerance denied him by Afro-American culture. Baldwin does not abhor this culture; he simply cannot overlook the stifling effects it has on nonconformists. He wants desperately to identify with Afro-American culture, but takes seriously the Christian, humanist values it espouses and the artistic imagination (the nonverbal or literate expressions) it suppresses. As with Wright, Baldwin is intuitively close to Afro-American culture and simultaneously on the edge of it. But, in contrast to Wright, this marginality is an interim condition, not a permanent state. Baldwin can envisage an escape from the inferno which leads to salvation, whereas Wright's vision lands him in a perennial limbo.

The most recent exponents in the Afro-American existentialist tradition are Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison. They illustrate the restrictive boundaries which confine and stifle Afro-American women. Jones' novels, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976), are essentially indictments of the Afro-American male's sexual exploitation of Afro-American females. Both novels are literally monologues or dialogues about deranged sexual relations within a repressive culture, a culture shaped

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<sup>44</sup> My reading of Baldwin is influenced by Stanley Macehuh's *James Baldwin: A Critical Study* (Third World Press, 1973).

by white racism and further reinforced by black machismo. Toni Morrison's first two works of fiction, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973), are lucid portraits of what it is like to be a talented Afro-American woman growing up in a strangling culture which punishes creativity and fears nonconformity. Behavioral patterns for women are rigidly set; violation invariably results in marginality. And marginality for imaginative Afro-American women in a *machismo* culture and hostile white world often leads to personal rebellion and sometimes self-destruction. Morrison captures this progression in a passage from her second novel,

In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.<sup>45</sup>

It is difficult to discern the conception of political struggle in the existentialist tradition. Given the artistic preoccupation of its members, political matters are secondary. If this tradition contains any conception of political struggle at all, it is a highly moralistic one. For example, the frequently cited last chapter of Wright's *Native Son* which contains Max's speech more closely resembles a sermon than a Marxist analysis of society.

Baldwin's masterful essays are grounded in moralism, often echoing the rhythm, syncopation and appeal of an effective sermon. The salient values are love, mercy, grace and inner freedom. In his famous work, *The Fire Next Time* (1964), he views the racial problem as stemming from truncated

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<sup>45</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York, 1973), p. 105.

personal relations, from the refusal of black and white Americans to confront each other as human beings. He sees whites as afraid of being judged by blacks, scared of being seen as they really are; blacks as viewing themselves through white eyes, so they know little of who they really are. Even Baldwin's more vitriolic writings about social change have a deep moral fiber which speaks to the heart of individuals rather than to a community planning to undertake concerted political action.

*The existentialist response to the challenge of self-image and self-determination is this: a candid acceptance of 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. Thus, it 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.

Despite this dependence on other traditions, the existentialist response is important because it grapples with a personal torment endemic to modernity. This torment is an inevitable alienation and sense of revolt from one's racial group, society and world, if felt only for a few moments. This tradition endorses a marginality which serves as an impetus to creativity.

#### *The Humanist Tradition*

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. Rather Afro-Americans are viewed as both meek and belligerent, kind and cruel, creative and dull—in short, 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.

The best example of the Afro-American humanist tradition is its music. The rich pathos of sorrow and joy simultaneously present in spirituals, the exuberant and lyrical tragicomedy of the blues, and the improvisational character of jazz, affirm Afro-American humanity. These distinct artforms, which stem from the deeply entrenched oral and musical tradition of African culture and evolve out of Afro-American experience, express what it is like to be human under black skin in America. Afro-American musicians are Afro-American humanists *par excellence*. They relish their musical heritage and search for ways to develop it. This search proceeds without their having to prove to others that this heritage is worth considering, or that it is superior to any other. Rather the Afro-American musical heritage develops and flourishes by using both its fertile roots and elements from other musical traditions—from the first religious hymns and work songs through 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. The heritage remains vibrant, with innovation and originality ensuring continual growth. Indeed, it has become one of the definitive elements in American culture.

The chief literary figures of the Afro-American humanist tradition—the young Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown and Ralph Ellison—turn to the culture of the Afro-American masses, to blues, jazz and folklore, as the ingredients of their art. They feel no need to be either superior to whites or marginal to Afro-American culture. They seem to consider themselves relatively secure with their heritage, as well as those of other groups or nations.

The first major literary expression of Afro-American humanism is found in Jean Toomer's still insufficiently studied *Cane* (1923). This work is a search for Afro-American humanity in the alluring, beautiful and burdensome black culture of the South. This unconventional collage of poignant stories and poems is a gem, a relatively untapped treasure that yields deep insights into Afro-American culture.

Toomer describes the myriad of constraining effects resulting from the attitudes and beliefs of Afro-Americans in rural settings. He portrays lives of spirituality and degradation. Women are objects, sex is sterile, human relations are exploitative and painful. The innocent Karintha is treated as a commodity; Becky is caught in a web of miscegenation, hypocrisy and sympathy; Fern's other-worldly life melts into nothingness, dissolves into anomie.

When Toomer shifts to the urban setting, despair persists, but possible liberation looms. This liberation lies in the artistic shaping of the past, the discovery of self by understanding the spiritual riches of this past. The central characters, Dan and Kabnis, are archetypes of the Afro-American artist. Dan, whose roots stem from the rural South, comes to the urban North with a messianic mission: to remind the "New Negroes" of their roots. He pursues the socially pretentious and haughty Muriel, who avoids him and ignores his message. Nevertheless, he emerges from the confining Afro-American urban world of self-hatred and shame, aware of the grand challenge of creating an ordered view of life from a fading folk past.

This theme of candid confrontation with the past is further illustrated in "Kabnis", the last and longest story in *Cane*. Kabnis is self-effacing and uncomfortable with Southern culture, a culture he knows little of. He confronts his roots in the person of Father John, a former slave. Kabnis, a

mulatto, has denied any links with slavery by disavowing any black ancestors. When Father John utters his long-awaited words of wisdom (Christian quips about the sinfulness and mendaciousness of whites), Kabnis is disappointed and angry. He had expected more than mere small talk about an oppressive past, a past, he believes, filled with black docility fueled by a slave religion. Kabnis is ashamed of this past and looks into the future with perplexed eyes.

Toomer's insight is that any acceptable Afro-American self-image begins with unflinching introspection. For an oppressed people, a mere superficial glance will result in self-gratifying celebration of heroic resistance, or self-pitying lament over the great damage done. Toomer opts for neither alternative. Instead, he looks into the Afro-American past and sees the small yet cumulative struggles of human beings against overwhelming odds, the creation of both supportive values and stifling mores.

His profound message to Afro-Americans is that in modernity, where alienation is commonplace, it is important to be aware of roots, but even this provides no assurance of ability to achieve a positive self-image in the ever-changing present. The search for personal identity is never a pleasant one if only because the very need for it connotes a misplacement, dislocation and homelessness of the self. The act of self-definition forever remains open-ended, with no guarantee of triumph. Indeed, the process takes precedent over the result, since any static self-identity soon disintegrates the self.

Only a person highly knowledgeable of, and sensitive to the Afro-American past, moved by its many struggles, though not blind to its shortcomings, could give such a sympathetic and credibly convincing portrait of an old, God-fearing, Christian, black woman as did Langston Hughes with

Aunt Hagar in his only novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Although Hughes unequivocally objects to her orthodox religious beliefs, bourgeois values and white standards, he admires the perseverance and fortitude of Aunt Hagar. Despite adverse circumstances, she endures, with a joy derived from her Christian faith, and its Dionysian rituals. Aunt Hagar triumphs over overwhelming odds in her own dynamic and flexible way, without self-hatred, self-pity or self-deception. She overcomes by pure, unabated struggle.

This simple, but profound message of personal and communal struggle voices the wisdom of Afro-American folklore, blues and jazz. It guides the con life of Sterling Brown's Slim Greer in *Southern Road* (1932) and the tenuous and ultimately tragic plight of Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

The Afro-American humanist tradition reaches its literary apex in the writings of Ralph Ellison. He stands out among Afro-American humanists, and all Afro-American artists of the other traditions, not only because of the superb mastery of his craft and the acuteness of his mind, but also because he takes the Afro-American art-forms of the past with more intellectual seriousness than other Afro-American artists. He understands the spirituals, blues, jazz and folklore of the Afro-American masses to be, not artifacts for self-congratulation or objects of catharsis, but rather aesthetic modes of expression that represent distinctive perceptions of reality. They serve as media of social communication which express the values for the joint communal existence of Afro-Americans. For Ellison, the task of the Afro-American artist is to locate, articulate and delineate the universal human core of these Afro-American art-forms and transform this discovery into a work of art that portrays the complexity and ambiguity of human existence.

The major aim of political struggle in the Afro-American humanist tradition is found in the works of the young A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen of the *Messenger*, William Jones of the Baltimore *Afro-American* (all three during the 1920's), the later Du Bois, Paul Robeson, post-Mecca Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, the later Imamu Baraka and to a certain extent the theology of James Cone.<sup>46</sup> These thinkers share a certain common value: the necessity for the democratic control over institutions in the productive and political processes. The basic assumption of this Afro-American humanist political viewpoint is that the present economic system and social arrangements cannot adequately alleviate the deplorable socioeconomic conditions of the Afro-American masses. This assumption is linked to a corollary claim, namely that the circumstances of the black poor and those of the black working class (including both blue and white collar workers) are qualitatively similar and only quantitatively different. In other words, the Afro-American middle class merely (yet significantly, in human terms) have higher-paying jobs than the Afro-American lower-class; but neither have any meaningful participation in the decision-making process as to who gets hired or fired nor any control over the production of goods and services.

The ostensible oppressive circumstances of the Afro-American poor and the less visible ones of the Afro-American working class are both linked to the relative powerlessness of Afro-Americans, not only in the political process, *but, more importantly, in the productive process*. This lack of

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<sup>46</sup> The other important stream of thought and behavior in the Afro-American humanist tradition is "reformist". It extends from Frederick Douglass through Booker T. Washington to Benjamin Hooks. This stream is represented by those people who satisfy the cultural criteria of Afro-American humanism and advocate certain reforms in the capitalist system. They fail to promote structural change in society. The stream of thought and behavior mentioned above (in the essay) represent those people who satisfy the same cultural criteria, but support the replacement of the capitalist system with one that extends democracy into the institutions of production so that the government and economy is truly "of the people, by the people, and for the people." This replacement constitutes a structural change in society, especially a redistribution of its wealth.



significant control in the work situation also holds for the white poor and working class.

Historically, the white poor and working class have served as formidable obstacles for Afro-American enhancement. Racism has been a source of intra-class conflict. But the future looks different.

Expansion of interracial unionization in the South, the radicalization of integrated unions in blue and white collar occupations and the concerted push for federalized policy concerning national problems of unemployment and health care, may provide the framework for a new era, an era in which the black and white poor and working classes unite against corporate domination of the economy and government. The Afro-American humanist political viewpoint eagerly endorses and energetically encourages action to make this era a reality.

The humanist political perspective acknowledges the complex interplay between pragmatism and ideology, electoral politics and structural social change. It discourages ideological programs which have no reasonable chance of succeeding and pragmatic ones that preclude the possibility of fundamentally transforming the present economic system and social arrangements. This perspective supports the continued participation of Afro-Americans in electoral politics, reformist strategies in the political and productive processes and reasonable radical agitation on persistent issues of common concern.<sup>47</sup>

The humanist response to the challenges of self-image and self-determination is this: *a promotion of 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.* This response contrasts sharply with the vitalist and rationalist ones. It neither romanticizes

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<sup>47</sup> Acceptable reformist programs must meet two criteria: improve the deplorable living conditions of the poor and open up new possibilities for people gaining some control over the major institutions that deeply affect their lives.

nor rejects Afro-American culture; it also avoids the self-serving pursuit of status, wealth and prestige. Instead, the humanist response 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.

Afro-American philosophy deems the norms of the humanist tradition desirable. These norms of unconstrained individuality and democratic control of the political and productive processes are acceptable because they promote personal development, cultural growth and human freedom. They foster the fulfillment of the potentialities and capacities of all individuals, encourage innovation and originality in Afro-American culture, and expand people's control over those institutions that deeply affect their lives.<sup>48</sup>

So Afro-American philosophy diachronically reconstructs the Afro-American past and critically evaluates Afro-American responses to crucial challenges in the present. It attempts to understand the Afro-American experience in order to enhance and enrich the lives of Afro-Americans; it demands personal integrity and political action.

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<sup>48</sup> Needless to say, this endorsement of the humanist tradition and its norms is not a justification of them. The latter indeed is necessary if people are to be convinced to accept them. Unfortunately, space does not permit such an endeavor in this essay.