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A New Philosophical Movement from the Twentieth Century and one of its Founders

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A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader is a book of axiology, ethics, and metaphilosophy. I recommend this book to any group of English-speaking graduate students and professors in philosophy departments, anywhere on the planet. I also recommend it as a supplementary text in relevant undergraduate courses in philosophy, such as Ethics, American Philosophy, or Social-Political Philosophy. I will focus on Dr. Leonard Harris's contribution to the profession of philosophy as displayed in this latest, so far only, book of his self-authored philosophy articles.

The overarching thesis statement to the book in my assessment is this, "The intent is both to philosophize philosophy born of struggle and to philosophize an account worthy of its name as a noun token" (p.15). This sentence is present in the first chapter of the book and it provides an expectation for the proceeding articles. As the book is a collected edition with no single argument, it is impossible to have a narrow thesis statement that neatly encompasses the book. The articles are grouped into five parts, but for the sake of brevity I dropped the subtitle on those that have them: Prolegomenon; Immiseration and Racism; Honor and Dignity; An Ethics of Insurrection; and Bridges to Future Traditions. Each article, except for chapters one and fourteen, has a previous life of its own, as they were each published apart since 1992 (pp.ix-x). One commonality shared by the articles is their engagement with historical and social reality of humans. In light of this, Harris states in a stroke of clarity, "The precondition for the possibility of knowledge, and a necessity for well-being, is health. Without health, nothing follows...Philosophies born of struggle, I contend, should include corporeality of health and avowed valuations" (p.15). What Harris means by "avowed valuations" can be seen in Chapter 11, where he states that "a viable philosophy...should be encoded with...a philosophical orientation that gives credence to epideictic rhetoric, imagination, and insurrection" (p.189). Socratic reasoning methods are not compatible with avowed valuations, as Harris argues against

them in Chapter 11, instead starting favorably with the philosophy of Alain Locke and Locke opening the door for him to argue for a philosophy of struggle (pp.189-190).

Some of you may think it an obvious truth, that health matters for knowledge, but some obvious truths have underexplored philosophical implications. Philosophies born of struggle under this criterion by Harris overlap with human rights. According to Amartya Sen the capabilities approach as he understands it has a strong relation with human rights where human rights create a protective space for many capabilities (“Human Rights and Capabilities,” *Journal of Human Development* 6 (2):pp.151-166, 2005). Philosophies born of struggle may have a more complex relation with human rights. From my understanding, many ethical theories have a difficulty justifying protection of disadvantaged groups, especially from an objective criterion. Philosophies born of struggle do not have this constraint, notably Harris’s insurrectionist ethics, as they typically accept or justify that protecting those with lesser status within a society is a worthy aim. It seems, then, that philosophies born of struggle might be complementary to human rights as a protective mechanism for disadvantaged groups.

Harris’s philosophizing utilizes and considers the methodological intermixing of normativity, psychological biases, aesthetics, and logical argumentation on any given philosophical topic. This is due to Harris’s axiological and meta-philosophical commitments. “The very structure of philosophy should provide tools, poetry, imagery, evidential reasoning and openness about its deep structural values and norms” (p.15). Depending on the problem, dilemma, intuition, or tradition, one would philosophize with the appropriate emotional or intellectual structure.

The example of the slave *ship*, as in the traumatic transportation of slaves from one continent to another, is used by Harris in chapters four, nine, ten, fourteen, and sixteen, but in chapter one he refers to the slave *revolt* as an invitation to philosophize with him an important dilemma, yet typically neglected in ancient philosophers, for example, Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle referred to slaves and slavery in their writings, but these were merely background in a dialogue, as in Plato, or were an accepted societal condition, as in Aristotle. Harris says:

The preponderance of evidence suggests that slave revolts or slave attacks on their masters fail; every woman and man engaged in such activities is acting against, on reflection, reasoned judgement, empirical evidence of probable success and utilitarian considerations. Almost no slave could have empirical evidence at their disposal to make such evaluations in any event. Nonetheless, they should revolt; they should escape. (p.19)

Why revolt or escape? Because misery should be struggled against. Later in Chapter 1 he states, “I contend, as a normative claim, that genuine philosophy is *Philosophia nata ex conatu* (philosophy as, and sourced by, strife, tenaciousness, organisms striving), *ex intellectualis certamen cum sit* (the result of intellectual struggle with real corporal existence) always inclusive of undue duress...” (p.20). Some philosophies do not consider undue duress in their ethical reasoning or they are too restrictive as to what counts as undue, duress, or undue duress. For Harris, undue duress could be a major premise justifying escaping from a place. The ethical writings of Aristotle, Kant, or classical Pragmatists likely do not allow this in their original formulations. In chapter 5, Harris states, “Identical physiologies, however, as my examples will indicate, can be seen as categorically different depending on how subjects are constructed”

(p.100). Under the philosophizing of some past philosophers, if a subject is duty bound by a certain maxim of universality or is considered a slave because of their natural condition or it is ultimately impractical to leave, then their attempt at escaping what we consider a bad situation is unjustified. Harris clearly means that despite any of these reasons, one should escape the bad situation. On a related note, he rejects possible answers from Kantians and Pragmatists about what health is and its ethical implications for society when they hold either a metaphysical or transcendental essentialism that is “encoded in our being, of whose essence individuals can be instances” (p.100). This was interesting for me to read in Chapter 5, since these figures and philosophical movements, are so well respected in their epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical views, but on the concept of health they sound patently absurd.

Societal well-being is beyond personal agency but has direct bearing on the health of individuals and groups. The actuarial account of racism Harris creates uses the tools of actuaries to determine probabilities of, for example, health risk by racial categories (p.77). We can then see the “differences of mortality and morbidity related to or correlated by race with environments, employment, and ownership” (p.77). It also utilizes the concepts of necro-being and necro-tragedy saying, “Racism is a form of necro-being: it kills, and prevents persons from being born. It is absolute necro-tragedy. There is no redemption for the worst of its victims” (p.69). Chapter 4, where we find this account of racism, was originally published in 2018 in *Res Philosophica* and represents one of Harris’s latest effort to philosophize race. It may be his most important work in the book, since many scholars and general audiences are looking to find answers to what racism is and where they should stand on its various limit cases. This chapter in my estimation is certainly the most ambitious academically as it claims to avoid “anomalies” that “...logics of explanation [of racism]—that is, volitional, institutional, structural, and racial identities as primary cause” (p.70), fall prey to. While there are epistemic issues to consider between description, logic, and explanation in relation race and racism, I think time is better spent for now highlighting a moral aspect of the current discussion. “An actuarial account,” says Harris, “tracks consequence, despite their “ultimate” causal origin” (p.87). We must be careful, however, to not use these consequences to stereotype and further immiserate populations, such as some health insurance companies have done by extracting “predatory profit by charging costs based on race and neighborhood” (p.87). Using actuarial tools, Harris argues, I think rightly, that there are globally numerous types of racism, since this account can even help us see “race-based misery, whether the folk conception of race is peculiar to Tasmania, Rwanda, the United States [of America], or Burma” (70). There is no one racism, there are many, and there may be more to come.

Harris posits a philosophy where god does not matter without humans. My focus at the moment is Chapter 16. The telos, goal-directedness, of the universe and human history are imagined to be “amoral” (p.275). Harris argues that the future is indeterminate (p.282) and that liberation, including from immediate social maladies, is “at least laudable” for philosophers in their philosophical tasks (p.277). The amoral universe, along with human history, are addressed for humans contending with this, often, existential quandary in his various essays. While he sometimes fills the role of a poet and sociologist, Harris drives the metaphysical knife deeper as he has a cogent argument against historicism, that is, the future is not somehow embedded in the

present, not even for morality; the present does not reflect the future (p.288). This being the case, we are left without sure justice from suffering that is undeserved. This conclusion against historicism is assumed at the top of the book with only gestures toward why this might be (p.14). The authorial technique is justified because extended reasoning of how the conclusion is arrived at is presented later in the book, as I have shown here.

Harris does not seem to me to be against spirituality, but he is against paradoxes and other philosophical dilemmas being in the service of sustaining immiseration (pp.17-18). To put it succinctly, what matters is this human world and not the next since either there is no next, transcendental world or what we do here does not carry over. Religion, spirituality, and the discipline of philosophy in their institutional roles, then, should not be used to protect structures of power that prolong conditions of immiseration.

Editor McBride III contrasts Harris to widely known, public reasoning figures, saying that, “Because Harris postulates an amoral universe—no god, no divine plan, no cosmic teleology to give purpose and direction, and no cosmic principle (e.g., karma) systematically meting out reward and punishment—he is in opposition to a host of philosophers and theorists...such as Edward W. Blyden, Martin Luther King Jr., and Cornel West” (p.2). The amoral universe without regard for god that Harris posits does not require or entail immiseration. The concept of a *common denominator value* is attributed to philosopher Alain Locke, and Harris reasons we can utilize this concept for societal well-being. Harris reasons humans can create through the common denominator value of *dignity* the possibility of a world without collective degradation or subjection and, instead, with “self-confident persons and healthy agency” (p.144).

Harris was hosted at institutions of higher education in China, India, Senegal, and South Africa during the time that this book was in development and some of the last published articles were being submitted for publication in their respective venues (p.vii). Further, Harris has been part of philosophy panels for and has had a strong academic relation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He has also had extensive research travel throughout his philosophy career, for example, to the University of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as a Fulbright Scholar in 1998 as well as frequent visits to international academic conferences, such as the Caribbean Philosophical Association and the World Congress of Philosophy. This community of worldwide scholars made possible many of his achievements as a philosopher. He recognizes the importance of the academic community to build repositories of knowledge and “a trace,” such as preserving written records, digital media, etc., for future philosophers to build onto, preserve, change, and aid society (pp.275-281). While the archives and traces Harris references and details are mostly on African American and Africana philosophy, at least in Chapter 16, the lessons he imparts are useful for any discipline or subdiscipline of philosophy that is to have longevity, plus knowing the difficulty that went along with African American Philosophy achieving recognition as an institutional discipline is part of the history of philosophy. Any historian of philosophy could have genuine interest in the history of African American Philosophy; that interest should be recognized as important by their peers.

There may be a disconnect for philosophers that are avid followers of Enrique Dussel’s approach to philosophy when considering Harris’s philosophizing on struggle, tenacity, strife, and

organisms striving. Comparing Harris to Dussel is interesting and helpful because they both were crucial to institutionalizing academic philosophies that engage with society, not only reflect on it. Harris states, “I have avoided a marriage of hermeneutical phenomenology and Marxism in the spirit of Dussel’s *Philosophy of Liberation* in which persons are understood in terms of a “self versus other” dichotomy. One reason of importance is that I begin from a concept of the person as a dialogical and interrelated social being. Thus, characterizations of “self” and “other” already misconstrues the human” (p.31). However, despite this methodological difference, that Harris assesses as present in both Dussel’s 1980 *Philosophy of Liberation* and 2013 *Ethics of Liberation* (p.31), Harris’s contention that philosophies of struggle should address health may be compatible with Dussel’s contention in *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* that his philosophical aim is “...an ethics of life; that is to say, human life is the content of this ethics” (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, p.55). If people are not alive, if they are not healthy, they cannot struggle or liberate themselves from undue obstacles or provide a voice to their social condition.

Harris’s metaphilosophy involves structural critiques of the profession of philosophy. One example concerning Latin American philosophy is the following:

One of the saddest commentaries on the colonial heritage is that the former colonized tend to grant high honors, in the form of financial rewards, titles, and awards for books to scholars of the former colonizer. Of fifteen honored lecturers at the Centre for Logic, Epistemology and the History of Science at Universidade Estadual De Campinas, Brazil, by 2007, thirteen were from Europe and two from Latin America. It would be difficult to find a university in Europe that spends its money or time to honor any philosopher from Latin America unless it were a special ethnic award. (p. 24)

Harris’s intellectual and emotional willingness to open philosophy to value-laden exchange and critiquing institutional issues of the profession are aims any philosopher should be proud to emulate as a philosopher. A person instrumental to the publication of the book was its editor, Dr. Lee A. McBride III. He expertly analyzed and summarized various elements of Harris’s *A Philosophy of Struggle* in the introduction to the book. At the time of this writing, the historic protests over the murder of George Floyd at the knee of a police officer were occurring in various nations, a fit topic for the philosophical issues in this book. *A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader* provides us the opportunity to further strengthen bonds between people, cultures, and philosophers dealing with similar experiences, histories, and intertwined futures.