

THE PHILOSOPHICAL LEGACY OF DR. CHARLES W. MILLS

In her Preface to the majestic novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison describes the memory of her father as her inspiration for writing the book. Upon his death, Morrison shares that her siblings were each convinced that they were the favourite. They each believed that they were his confidant and co-conspirator. Morrison's siblings wondered how it was possible for a person to have so much to give and to give it so well that each understood what the gift meant: it was his life. And his gift made the recipients not only attempt the impossible, but believe that they could achieve it, too. Morrison concludes *Song of Solomon* with the chief character sprouting wings to take flight. Likewise, with the gift of his life, Dr. Charles W. Mills has left his many students, mentees, and readers with the impression that not only should you attempt to rebuild an exclusionary profession and world, a seemingly impossible feat, but that *you will succeed*.

Dr. Mills was unique in his unflagging commitment to nurturing the philosophical growth of his mentees. And his mentorship remained steadfast, even as he stood as a brilliant, iconoclastic leader of contemporary political philosophy. He had cause to ease the considerable burden he carried. From the outside looking in, one can infer the shear strain on his time of accepting invitations to speak, contributing to volumes and special issues, sitting on dissertation committees, and writing, always writing his original, prolific research. All this would have been enough for someone else to think less often about the welfare of those following in his footsteps. And yet Dr. Mills delighted in the flourishing of his mentees. His goal was to diversify academic philosophy in body and in spirit. That he was a dedicated mentor was a testament to the breadth of his philosophical vision. He strove to welcome a rising generation of black philosophers and philosophers of colour, as well as to cultivate a line of inquiry that would redefine what it means for anyone of any background to be a serious philosophy student and scholar.

Those who knew him even in passing felt his kind spirit. He instilled in you faith in the value of your work and your capacity to execute it well. I first met Dr. Mills as a philosophy Ph.D. student at The Graduate Center, CUNY. He had recently joined the department as a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy. I shared with him my plan to write a dissertation on the political thought of W.E.B. Du Bois. Like many graduate

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students, I was struggling to find where I belonged. I felt alienated by the established conventions for pursuing normative political theory – a subfield that is supposed to provide the principles and procedures for establishing a just modern democratic society and yet neglects so many key questions. What constitutes an inclusive model of justice that can redress nonideal conditions, in which so many persons fail to comply with a minimal public standard of respect and accountability? How exactly do race, gender, and the historical legacy of injustice undermine the emergence of just institutional arrangements? Who is the ideal moral reasoner that philosophers are always talking about anyway?

DEATH BRINGS IN ITS WAKE A PECULIAR SENSE OF ALONENESS IN WHICH ONE LOSES THE IMAGE OF ONE'S SELF THAT ANOTHER HELD

After Dr. Mills arrived in NYC, I was delighted to develop with his support my Du Boisian critique of contemporary political philosophy. His faith in my work showed me where I belonged in academic philosophy and that I might yet make a substantive contribution. It was an electrifying feeling. In our conversations over plastic trays and paper cups in the CUNY cafeteria, I felt like a co-conspirator rolling out a map of insurrection points for a revolution. Through our exchanges and my engagement with his work, I was turning, at once, into a Du Bois, Kant, and Rawls scholar, a strange hybrid that can make it difficult to find one's audience, save for Charles and a few others. Upon hearing news of his untimely death on the evening of September 20th, my sorrow was mixed with gratitude. It was an honour to have been considered a co-conspirator and a comrade. I will miss our conversations. And I will miss his faith in me. As Morrison puts it in reflecting on her grief, "Even more than I mourned him, I suffered the loss of the person he thought I was." Death brings in its wake a peculiar sense of aloneness in which one loses the image of one's self that another held. It obscures one's face like a heavy cloth. Or rather, it shows that the self

is a portrait in soapstone, easily rubbed out by loss. I cannot count myself among the many dear lifelong friends he had, but I know that among his mentees our collective sense of loss is a testament to the brightness of his spirit and his generous faith in our work.

Dr. Charles W. Mills died when the profession was just beginning to recognize what he had done. His passing should invite sustained reflection on what his philosophical legacy means. If we are to carry it on, we must understand his call to do philosophy differently. In a series of elegant but "punchy" moves, he opened a line of inquiry for the reconstruction of the philosophical imagination, especially for those writing in the liberal social contract tradition. He accomplished the unprecedented: he presented a set of difficult problems that mainstream, or as he put it "white-stream", philosophers had not so much been left unanswered, *as never raised in the first place*. Black chattel slavery, racial segregation, colonialism, and indigenous genocide and expropriation of land were somehow left outside the purview of Anglo-American and European philosophy, notwithstanding that the tradition prides itself on formulating rigorous accounts of justice and democracy for modern constitutional republics.

With the publication of his groundbreaking 1997 book, *The Racial Contract*, he developed a critique of political liberalism that pressed philosophers to acquire a modicum of self-awareness concerning our naive assumptions about the nature and interrelation of ideals and reality in our theories. He developed an array of original concepts to *reread* and *revise* political liberalism, including the concepts of white supremacy, subpersonhood, and, more recently, black radical liberalism/Kantianism. His goal was to highlight the omission of salient social conflicts in a nonideal racial reality (i.e., white supremacy, racialized subpersonhood) and to sketch a positive proposal for the reconstitution of a modern political community on fairer and more inclusive terms (i.e., black radical liberalism/Kantianism). The systematic subordination of persons often signifies an inferior social status, which licenses their exclusion from the scope of public concern. Dr. Mills terms this inferior social status as "subpersonhood". He adds that in the modern era the idea of white supremacy captures a political system that

enforces racialized asymmetries of power by protecting white public standing. Subpersonhood, therefore, tracks the asymmetrical social relations established by the political system of white supremacy in civil society and the public sphere. He forcefully rebukes contemporary political philosophy for failing to countenance white supremacy as the key source of social conflict in modern democratic societies. Proposing the radical revision of political liberalism, in his later years, he developed yet another original new project – black radical liberalism/Kantianism – to reconstruct the ideals, principles, and procedures that could redress nonideal racial realities and truly advance freedom and equality for all persons.

In part, Dr. Mills raised a meta-philosophical question about how philosophers should present the very idea of empirical reality in a normative political theory. The more our assumptions about empirical reality diverge from actual nonideal conditions, the less clear is the path through which a moral or democratic ideal can take hold in the world that we find ourselves in. But his critique of liberalism goes beyond abstract meta-philosophical speculation. It is not just that philosophers too are socially situated – and overwhelmingly white –

thinkers that inevitably have blind spots; rather, our blind spots have *deformed* our theories. He argued that the very conceptual framework of political liberalism is more of an obstacle than a guide to progress, inasmuch as it fails to track salient social conflicts or provide a method for redressing a shared experience of oppression. Philosophy, then, loses practical efficacy to be a meaningful guide for change. In the Marxist spirit with which he launched his career, his work remained steadfast in affirming that the point of philosophy is to change the world. In the last talk I would hear him give at Harvard University in 2019, a preview of his Tanner Lectures, he observed that given its glaring omissions, it appears as if the dominant liberal paradigm is *not for our world, for our times, or for people like us*, namely, victims and perpetrators of injustice. If philosophers cannot show how the ideals that underpin a theory can take root in the actual world, then in the struggle for change we are, at best, fair-weather friends just there for the good times. At worst, we stand complicit in racist brutality, like quack doctors who prescribe noxious elixirs when one has asked for a glass of water. In other words, “white-stream” philosophy has been worse than useless. The gross mismatch between



Charles W. Mills

popular philosophical systems and the actual nonideal world led him to view much of liberal political theory to be an ideological mouthpiece of white supremacist power. He thus called for the radical revision of political liberalism.

MERELY RAISING THE ISSUE OF NORMATIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MODERN STATE APPARENTLY SABOTAGES THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF CRITIQUE

In honouring his philosophical legacy, we should not forget that Dr. Mills was attacked by liberal centrists and the Left alike. On the one hand, to the extent that liberal centrists engaged his prolific writings at all, they relegated him to footnotes. The resounding complaint was that his critique of liberalism was not sufficiently “normative” or it did not broach liberalism’s “normative foundation.” In Kant/Rawls circles, to say that one’s work is not “normative” is akin to dismissing it as *meaningless*. It is a tactic that in one fell swoop – and without explicitly invoking race – employs a de facto racialized power dynamic to discredit Dr. Mills’ contributions and to sideline the historical and contemporary works of Africana, Latinx, and indigenous philosophers. The standard objection implies that if an argument unfolds in a nonideal empirical context, then it pertains to contingent empirical matters that are irrelevant to higher-order theoretical matters. Even if Charles is right, it doesn’t matter because his critique does not concern the more “essential” issues of “real” philosophy, such as the moral validity of first principles or the discursive procedures of public reason. In other words, Dr. Mills’s philosophical legacy is much ado about nothing.

On the other hand, the Left viewed Dr. Mills’ engagement with political liberalism as an embarrassing misfortune that befell him later in life. A smug echo-chamber refrained, “Oh Charles is a liberal. Too bad!” as if the mere observation constituted a meaningful

objection or counter-argument. The standard objection here goes that Charles betrayed his Marxist roots, from the grassroots activism of his student days against global capital in his homeland of Jamaica to his early publications on analytic Marxism. Merely *raising* the issue of normativity in the context of the modern state apparently sabotages the emancipatory potential of critique. That political liberalism has neglected salient social conflicts, namely, a nonideal racial reality rooted in slavery and segregation in the Americas, signifies *eo ipso* that it is necessarily a dotting handmaiden to white supremacist power.

The polarizing effect of Dr. Mills’ work is a testament to its ingenuity. In my view, each of the interpretative tendencies above fails to engage his work on his terms. In mischaracterizing the meaning of his philosophical legacy, we miss the opportunity to learn to pose better questions and to find better answers to the stubborn problem of living together well, given our inheritance of a political modernity disfigured by a legacy of racial injustice. In his own words, Dr. Mills’ objective was to “de-ghettoize” contemporary analytic philosophy. He rejected that Africana and African-American philosophy, and the concerns and experiences of historically oppressed groups, should be relegated to Black Studies or remain outside debates about democracy and justice flourishing in contemporary analytic philosophy. The concerns and experiences of historically oppressed groups are not contingent empirical matters, at least they are not any more contingent than the historical emergence of the modern state or human rights discourse after WWII. Yet we do not treat these latter issues as historical anomalies that detract from a sound normative political theory. Instead we view these historical contingencies as ultimately delivering the concrete substantive content of a theory of democracy and justice. Neither are the subfields that focus on a compassionate engagement with the concerns and experiences of historically oppressed groups tangential to the advance of political liberalism. Rather, Dr. Mills held that the issues of race and racism stand as a litmus test for reconstructing a viable liberal paradigm that can truly chart the actualization of the free and equal public standing of all persons. In other words, the distinctive challenge of his lifework compels philosophers to treat the likes of Rawls, Kant, and Du Bois as *interlocutors*.

Dr. Mills’ critique of political liberalism thus builds a

bridge across a vast ghettoized terrain to neglected philosophical traditions whose contributions might provide the essential theoretical resources for transforming political liberalism into a true handmaiden of justice. In reconstructing our philosophical imagination in this integrative way, we will inevitably find very different – and perhaps more useful – models of an inclusive and fair modern state, domestic and global citizenry, and political agency. Perhaps even a theory of justice that is better suited for our times and for people like us. But note that Dr. Mills’ call to do philosophy differently requires careful and painstaking argumentation, not hand-waving dismissals.

There is much difficult work that remains to be done. For, whatever disagreements one might have had with Charles’ critique of liberalism, there is no doubt that he was right that liberalism has yet to give a convincing response that can resolve the social conflicts generated by a nonideal racial reality; and for that failure we must hold philosophy accountable. We cannot move forward in this vein, however, if we treat the engagement with liberalism as a fool’s errand. The task is to show exactly where the liberal conceptual apparatus is exhausted *and* to present alternative corrective measures, to which any political philosopher should pay attention.

IN HIS OWN WORDS, DR. MILLS’ OBJECTIVE WAS TO “DE-GHETTOIZE” CONTEMPORARY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

To be clear, Charles did not expect or want passive followers. He welcomed criticism, as evident in his rich critical exchanges with Tommie Shelby and Carol Pateman. He was willing to entertain meaningful objections to those ready to meet him on his terms, looking at the actual world as he saw it, scarred by a legacy of racial injustice and in need of compassionate redress. One of my last memories of him is his

attending a talk, in which I presented my objections to his rejection of ideal theory and proceeded to defend Du Bois as an ideal theorist of justice. Why not turn to Du Bois to provide the moral and democratic ideals and procedures to reconstitute a polity stripped of its white supremacist foundations and deliver a viable theory of justice? Isn’t that what an “ideal” theory of justice should be doing anyway, if it has any merit? Afterwards, Charles walked up to me, smiling, and *thanked* me. That being-at-home-in-the-world feeling washed over me. The memory of it today presses on me the responsibility to carry on the spirit of his philosophical legacy in good faith.

The morning after Dr. Mills died I had to teach. As I walked across campus to my classroom, I noticed for the first time a statue of Orpheus that stood at the entrance of the building that houses the philosophy classes. I had not noticed it before. Orpheus was playing his lyre to fish gathered at his feet. The statue was covered in cheap gold paint. The eyes of the man and the animals were missing their pupils. In their place were blank metal slots. And I thought to myself that though Charles is gone, we must keep playing our lyres. Our song will hardly be as captivating. But before we raise our instrument, let’s take care that it is well tuned.

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