

Race, Gender, and the Purification of Reason

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My current research project is an exploration of the ways in which *race* as a concept and *racism* as a practice are bound up within conceptions of purity. Elsewhere I have discussed the function of what I call the “politics of purity” at the most basic conceptual level of competing accounts of the ontology of race. This paper, however, will set aside these ontological issues for the moment, and will instead take up the role that purity plays in our understanding of racial oppression (racism) as a social/political phenomenon. One of the clearer ways in which purity functions within racist practice and policy is through an obsession with the purity of whiteness. But what makes the purity of whiteness so important is its *normative* role as the *purest* manifestation of the human. Protecting whiteness is understood, within a racist context, as protecting humanity itself, or at least the highest manifestations thereof. Recognition of this point naturally raises important questions about philosophical anthropology – what is the conception of the human operating here, and how has it come to be so closely linked with race? This paper will sketch out some of my current thinking on these questions, concluding with a brief reflection on the way in which the normative conception of the human has also been importantly *gendered*, and how the understanding of processes of *purification* that I am advancing here can help to account for the interplay of race and gender in the purification of the *body politic*.

Traditionally, two important markers of agency (and thus genuine humanity) have been *reason* and *freedom*. The ancient Greek tradition clearly linked rationality with humanity, from Socrates’ admonition that the unexamined life was not worth living, through Plato’s prioritization of the rational part of the soul in the governance of both individuals and the *polis*, to Aristotle’s identification of human beings as *rational* animals. Likewise, as Elizabeth Spellman has so compellingly articulated, rationality was explicitly linked to the possession of certain types of bodies and certain kinds of status, such that women, children, and slaves were at best on the margins of the rational, and thus the *human*.

Similarly, the *cine qua non* of humanity has been associated with freedom as well. Christian thought identified freedom as that which distinguished humanity from the animal world, over which, of course, we were given *dominion*, a fact which will become quite relevant as this discussion develops. In the enlightenment era, it was *autonomy* and *independence* that separated the fully human from the base, barbaric, and bestial. It should be stressed, in addition, that freedom and reason are often directly linked. The Cartesian Ego, as a paradigmatic case, is both a *thinking* thing, and, as non-material, a *free* thing. For Kant, likewise, it is through the exercise of our reason that we liberate ourselves from the shackles of our baser nature, and to this extent to be rational is to be free or autonomous, and vice-versa. At the same time, to be fully *human* is to be fully rational and autonomous, while a failure to be fully rational evinces a lack of full humanity. What must be interrogated here, however, is not simply the fact that some are considered rational and some are not (though this is clearly very important), but the very conception of rationality (and freedom) operant in this schema.

While it is in the Ancient Greek intellectual tradition that the understanding of reason as *essentially* human has its roots, reason for the ancients was understood as more practical and holistic than their enlightenment successors. Humanity for Aristotle may have been the “rational animal”, but we were still in important ways *animals*. Aristotelian ethics is clearly predicated upon an understanding of rationality as the *telos* of humanity,

yet *excellence* in rationality is a matter of *practical* reason – it is about trial and error along with rough guidelines and models, not absolute and exhaustive rules. The virtuous life is surely a rational life, but it is reason as manifest in a constant *practice* and engagement not only with lived experience in the empirical world, but also importantly with other human beings. While the Christian emphasis on the divine, virtuous, and pure spiritual realm over and against the sinful, corrupt, and base realm of the physical pushed the understanding of Reason in a different direction, this process, which I will describe as one of purification, reached its climax with the emergence of European Modernity. Reason at this point came to be understood in two distinct but interrelated ways, which can be roughly captured by the distinction in early modern philosophy between rationalism and empiricism.

In the rationalist tradition, reason is purified insofar as it is purged of any association with or dependence upon the physical world. The ideal of the rational in this tradition is abstraction and universality. Reason yields universal principles and rules on the model of mathematical proofs and precepts of logic. The methodology is to abstract from all particularity and context, allowing the light of *pure* reason to illuminate the darkness and confusion of the empirical world. Equally significant, the rational agent is not influenced by his¹ own more “base” nature – including emotions, instincts, drives, appetites, and so on. Reason is distinct from these animalistic aspects, and in this way humanity is no longer properly understood as the rational *animal*. Rather, the human being, through the use of reason, is able to transcend our empirical, embodied, *animalistic* aspects, thus *liberating* and *purifying* ourselves from that which is corrupt, deceptive, and coercive. In the empiricist tradition, meanwhile, the aim is clearly not to withdraw from the empirical world, there nevertheless remains is a kind of purification of reason operant in this tradition through the removal of biases or particularities of judgment in our understanding of the empirical world. The ideally rational empiricist agent must in effect bracket his² agency – he must approach the world as an impartial, ideal observer, and only then can he be understood as fully rational. There is a purifying moment here in the sense of a purging of the particularity of the agent. He must attend closely to the empirical world, but his observation is rational to the extent that it approaches an ideal of detached, impartial and objective observation. He must use his senses of course, but when he uses them well they should be effectively *anybody’s* senses – they must be purified of specificity.

These approaches thus differ in their understanding of the manner of our approach to the empirical world, but their similarities, relevant to the project of purification, far outweigh their differences. Firstly, both approaches see the mental as radically distinct from the physical; one approach holding that truth is a matter of strict formulation of universal precepts independent of any *body* at all, while the other holds that truth emerges from the passive and *detached* observation of the empirical world such that any body at all could make the same observations. In both cases, the *mixture* of the mental and the physical is irrational – either the empirical intrudes upon and corrupts the purity of our understanding of the basic structures of the world, or our biased subjectivity corrupts the purity of our perception and thus our grasp of the fundamental laws of nature. Secondly, both approaches point toward a standard of explanation that holds mechanistic, mathematical understandings of the world (both natural and moral) as its guiding principle. The natural world is governed by laws that are universal and accessible either through pure reason or pure observation, such that understanding these fundamental laws offers a *complete* understanding of the natural world. Empirically, the aim is an exhaustive and pre-

¹ The use of the masculine pronoun is deliberate here.

² Again, the pronoun is intentional.

cise account of the laws governing the behavior of physical bodies. Morally, the aim is to arrive at universal and exhaustive laws and principles governing action – either consequentialist utility calculus where the subjectivity of the agent is irrelevant, or deontological duties and imperatives where the concrete particulars of the agent and his situation are irrelevant. The ideal goal, in other words, is the achievement of a *closed* and *complete* set of principles and rules for both describing and prescribing the world of human action. In this way reason can be understood as *purified*.

European modernity, as a project, can thus be understood as directed toward the purification of reason, and as such, the purification of humanity itself. The fully or genuinely human agent is the one who best manifests this purified notion of reason and its attendant conception of autonomy. To the extent that individuals or groups are less completely and purely rational, they are more like animals and less like human beings. As they developed together, these processes of purification lead to an effort to provide a taxonomy of human subdivision. Because pure reason insists on complete and exhaustive principles of organization, such a taxonomy, if it is to be fully rational, must yield categories that are discrete, fixed, and closed. White, propertied males became the embodiment of pure reason (though “embodiment” is somewhat ironic here, since it is precisely in the alleged irrelevance of their bodies that they were purely rational), while women, non-whites, and the poor became *essentially* impure to varying degrees. It is certainly true that such distinctions and associations did not generate spontaneously during the modern era, it is a hallmark of modernity that these distinctions were rarified and became an organizing principle. The emergence and refinement of scientific methodology, for example, provided a new set of tools for analyzing and evaluating the world, providing an easy way to classify and categorize a normative hierarchy of human subdivisions predicated upon biological difference, but organized normatively around a hierarchy of inherent rationality. Thus, European Modernity marks an historical epoch in which the associations of Africans, Asians, and the indigenous peoples of the newly “discovered” world with unreason and thus sub-humanity could be clearly and distinctly articulated in a manner which was understood to be objective, scientific, and dispassionate, which virtues themselves served as further evidence for the purity of the reason, and thus the humanity, of those performing the descriptions and ascriptions. From the point of view of this project, the fact that “we whites” are able to so clearly recognize the irrationality of the non-whites we are encountering around the globe stands not only as further evidence of *our* inherent rationality, but as the principle around which this notion of who *we* are is organized.

Once reason has been understood in this purified manner, and humanity itself has been divided up according to purity, it becomes clear that the geography of the globe is able to take on a new logic. Insofar as different peoples occupy and control different parts of the globe, and different peoples have different capacities for (this purified notion of) rationality, it turns out that different parts of the globe are themselves more or less rational according to the qualities of the people who dominate them. The geography of the globe is thus at the same time a *geography of reason*, which point Hegel makes especially clear in his reference both to Europe as the epicenter of the upheavals of the *Weltgeist*, and to Africa as essentially untouched by Reason, and thus outside of the scope of *history*. Since the proper position of the less-rational – the sub-human – is dependence, and the proper position of the purely rational – the fully-human – is independence and control (domination), it is incumbent upon the purely rational to expand the sphere of their influence, thus bringing the light of reason into the darkest corners of the globe. Colonialism, as the military and economic conquest of the globe, thus becomes a logical outgrowth and practical *imperative* of the purification of reason. In this sense, one’s status as puri-

fied/rarified Reason is writ large through control over the globe. The “evidence” of European superiority thus lies in its established ability to dominate the rest of the world, thus demonstrating its dominance, autonomy, and rationality.

The triumph of reason over nature, of the mental over the bodily, is manifest both by demonstrating the absolute rationality of the natural world (its ability to fit neatly into discreet and exclusive categories of being) and by demonstrating the human capacity to bend nature to our will. This last point is crucial for two reasons. First, if the population of a particular part of the globe is not understood to be properly demonstrating their mastery over it, then that is evidence of their irrationality, and thus their unfitnes for self-government. This was an explicit justification employed by the English, following John Locke, in their conquest of North America. Second, as irrational, such people are not rightly conceived of as fully human, and can be understood in a significant sense as part of the natural environment – a resource to be developed, exploited, and controlled. Thus colonialism, as the assumption of mastery over the resources of the globe, both environmental and (not fully) human, is not only a legitimate project, but an imperative one. To fail to bring reason in its purest and most fully human form to the rest of the globe is a failure to assert one’s proper place as master of the physical world, and thus is a failure to be fully rational. Once these purified conceptions of reason and the human are established, colonialism becomes an inevitable and self-justifying project.

It is important to stress that this did not happen all at once, or in a mechanistic way. It is part of what Enrique Dussel has referred to as the mythos of modernity that there is something fixed and essential about Europe and Europeans that legitimates and explains their mastery of the globe (Dussel 1995). But in rejecting that myth, and the politics of purity that informs it, I must seek a different account. European Modernity cannot be understood as an event, or as a state, but must instead be understood as an ongoing process and project. The year 1492, for example, did not mark the year at which the purified notions of reason and human sprang fully-formed into existence and began to organize the political, philosophical, and scientific activities of Europe for centuries to come. Indeed, charting where exactly “Europe” begins and ends is part of the ongoing process of modernity. Returning to 1492, that year was pivotal not only because it marks Spain’s encounter with the Western Hemisphere, but also the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula in the course of the “*reconquista*” of Europe for Christendom.

Two important points emerge from this example of Spain. The first is that one’s status as European or not, and even what European *means*, must be constantly reaffirmed, renegotiated, and contested. The second point is that from the perspective of Europe as the center of a *pure* world order, “periphery” has a double meaning. There is clearly the periphery *external* to that center. Asia, Africa, and the Americas. But there is also the periphery *internal* to that center. Spain, Italy, and Greece, for instance, are suspect as a result of their proximity and intimacy with Africa, while Eastern Europe is suspect as a result of their proximity and intimacy with Asia. England, Scandinavia, and the rest of *Northern* Europe, meanwhile, border only the ice and ocean, and thus are free from the corrupting influence Africa and Asia. There are other “internal” threats to the purity of Reason (and thus the Human) as well, such as women, homosexuals, and working class people, and in the *process* of maintaining mastery over those who are less rational, one simply reaffirms the purity of one’s reason. Indeed, since purity must always be mythic-al, it appears on the scene always through the process of myth-making. It requires the constant re-telling (and re-enactment) of the myth of purification. In this particular case, Europe emerges on the world stage as disparate peoples take up the task of articulating and asserting a distinctly European identity. The purity of European modernity, in other words, is parasitic upon the impurities that exist both inside and outside of Europe.

Without such impurities, there would be no occasion for the telling and retelling of the myth of purity.

Colonialism and racism can thus be understood in part as manifestations of this project of the purification of Reason and Humanity. The meaning and shape of race and racism are organized around the articulation of this myth of purity, and one's specific place within that myth. Furthermore, this project of purification demands not only the purification of one's individual rational faculties, but also the employment of those faculties in the domination and control of the external world as a way to demonstrate one's autonomy and rationality. Politically, this takes the form of the domination of corrupting influences within the body politic (women, non-whites, Jews, Homosexuals, the disabled, etc.), and the projection of reason and domination externally (colonialism and neocolonialism). In this way we can see how gender and race become different aspects or moments of this project of purification. In colonial North America, for instance, a white woman could both represent purity and reason in relation to the "savages" to the west, while within the European outposts of the colonies she stood as an impurity demanding control and domination. Clearly, much more needs to be said about this interrelation. What I hope to have shown for the moment, however, is that common to both racial and gender oppression is a relation to a certain conception of Reason. It is essential to our shared efforts to address these manifestations of oppression that we further articulate the nature of this view of reason and its shortcomings, lest our struggles reduce to a simple jockeying for position along the periphery of an ongoing project of the purification of humanity.