

Reading questions March 27

Ladelle McWhorter, “Racism and Biopower”

Note that this article appeared in a collection of essays called *On Race and Racism in America: Confessions in Philosophy*, which asks American academics to reflect on the relation between American racism and American philosophy. Ladelle McWhorter’s work is solidly on the “continental” side of the split in contemporary Anglo-American academia between the majority “analytic” tradition, and the minority “continental” or “European” tradition. (She refers to this split in the opening pages.) Her thesis? “I will contend that cultivating a genealogical awareness of the racism that shapes our society and ourselves is a powerful beginning on the way toward diminishing our confusion about race and racism, and, even more important, toward overcoming our racist culture and our racist selves” [57].

1. McWhorter’s first thesis is that racism is a historical phenomenon that must be examined in its particular contexts. The context that most interests her is “Anglo-America” in the era of settler colonialism, and she turns to Foucault for a genealogy of racial discourse. On page 64 she suggests that Foucault identifies “two major points of historical transformation.” What are they?
2. What is the difference between morphological racism and biological/ physiological/ scientific/ developmental/ eugenic (all these words get used at various times) racism?
3. What is *biopower*, and how is it implicated in scientific and state racism? (NB: Although much of McWhorter’s analysis revolves around work by Foucault that we have not read in this course, Foucault’s analysis of biopower and the scientific racism he thinks it motivates and informs rests on his analysis of normalization from *Discipline and Punish*. How so?)
4. What does McWhorter say (or imply) are the motivations or the “drivers” of Anglo-American racism in its various forms?

Linda Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment”

Note that the page numbers of the original book are embedded in the text of the e-version.

1. What are the three positions in contemporary race theory that Alcoff identifies, and what is wrong with the first two? Why does she prefer the third?
2. “Racialized identities affect not only one’s public status but one’s experienced selfhood as well” (183). What does Alcoff mean? What is the difference between *objectivist* and *subjectivist* accounts?
3. “It is commonly believed that for one to be a racist one must be able to access in consciousness some racist belief, and that if introspection fails to produce such a belief then one is simply not racist” (188). What does one have to believe about perception to believe this? How does Alcoff use Merleau-Ponty to argue against this position?
4. What is the “postural model of the body,” or the “postural schema”? List the points about racial experience that Alcoff attaches to the idea of a postural schema.
5. Alcoff uses a number of anecdotes and examples (from her own experience and others’, whether recounted or published). We will be talking about these in class, so make a list of them and be sure you know what point Alcoff thinks each one makes.