

August 2008

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Recommended Citation

Frye, Charles (2008) "THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN BLACK STUDIES," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 4 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol4/iss1/9>

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Charles Frye

THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN BLACK STUDIES*

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS A traditional belief among black people that knowledge bestows power. Obviously this is a belief held by many other peoples as well. This power is not regarded merely as temporal power, i.e., economic or socio-political, but is seen also and predominantly as atemporal and personal in nature. The belief is that learning makes people better people—moving them closer to the Source of all knowing, taking them back Home.

The collective experience of the Middle Passage was the major initiation for New World Blacks. Half died. Half lived to be spewed forth on these shores—new men and women—but not completely new. Among the things these people retained was the old inclination for “the work” of self perfection.

Over the years this inclination has been altered. Some Blacks have used Christianity to this end. In the Northern Hemisphere the more specialized, practical knowledge was consigned to the conjure woman or man. In the Southern Hemisphere this knowledge was incorporated with Christianity to form Voodoo. In either Hemisphere, the need for Blacks to be privy to the special feelings engendered by special knowledge and ecstatic experience seemed essential for their psychic health. Many supplemented these experiences with the even more secret and specialized knowledge of Lodge rituals.

Even before the abolition of slavery, formal Western education had been identified as another vehicle for what by then had become the notion of “raising the race.” For some Blacks, self perfection had become simply “lightening the race.”

The traditional belief¹ that knowledge is sacred and special and that only special, i.e., highly evolved, spiritually refined, mature, responsible people should

* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Third Annual Conference of the National Council for Black Studies, California State University, Sacramento, California, March 18-22, 1979. Copyright Charles A. Frye, 1980.

have access to it was and is a potential source of schizophrenia for Blacks in the presence of Whites.

This potential is especially keen for black intellectuals who see (1) that white people have access to seemingly special knowledge through books, (2) that Whites themselves are not particularly "special," and (3) that the knowledge which has seemingly made them matters of the world is a cold and shallow knowledge.

Another source of stress for some Blacks has been their failure to note the distinction between certification and education. Ever since the Renaissance and Reformation, Western education has been devoid of its soul.² Since then the goal of education has ceased to be self realization and the acquisition of real life skills. The graduation ceremony has become a parody of what it used to be when medieval universities still retained their link with the ancient Egyptian initiation system. Degrees of initiation into the mysteries of life, indicating the level of one's self mastery, have become mere academic degrees, indicating time spent and credits accumulated. Even the significance of the symbolism of the black, feminine garment which graduates, preachers and teachers still wear has been lost; except that some Blacks still expect "doctors" to be what they were in traditional societies: scholars/healers/teachers/preachers. Wherever individuals have assumed these roles, whether they are called houngan (spirit master), or witch doctor, or shaman, or simply priest, they functioned as servants of the Great Mother, the source of all Knowledge and Wisdom. Whether she was called Isis or Sophia or something else, one of her symbols was this black robe.

The establishment of black colleges on the model of the post-Renaissance University was unfortunate but understandable. And it was probably a bit much to ask that these Christian-sponsored institutions institutionalize a black intellectual tradition which included the knowledge of herbalists and of root-workers. However, many other practices and patterns of behavior which had survived the Middle Passage intact were also discarded as the remnants of a shameful slave/heathen African past.

Fortunately, black colleges were not able to keep all the Africanisms out. These kept cropping up in fraternity and sorority rituals and during half times at football games when the funky bands took the playing field.

Early black educators were inspired by the mission of "raising the race" in the shadow of slavery and in the face of legal discrimination. More recently with legal discrimination removed, with as many black students in white institutions as in black, and with business recruiters actively seeking black applicants, much of this mission has been lost. And the shallowness of the various post-Renaissance curricula is even more glaring.

With this loss, black intellectuals, increasingly isolated from the folk, often have only their credentials or “union cards” and the creature comforts these can afford.

It may be that alienation is the true mark of all educated people in all ages and places. Yet traditionally, the initiate, once he stopped following the human herd and lost his illusions, acquired an inspired world view. His new knowledge may not have made him carefree or happy, but it did make him secure in his unblinking vision of reality.

Modern-day doctors (M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s) are often still regarded as wise people in the popular view. The initiation process for these individuals is often as arduous as it was for the ancients. Yet there is something missing. The high suicide rate among medical doctors, for example, seems to attest to this. What is missing is that inspired world view. For the most part, modern-day schooling fails to regard the subjective psychological states of students as important. Yet these were central to the older initiation process. Such areas of concern as holistic medicine and interdisciplinary studies, which are today seen as avant-garde, were givens for educators right through the Renaissance. And these educators were not just concerned with interdisciplinary studies but with uni-disciplinary studies—the single discipline being philosophy.

The common complaints of black and other students about the irrelevance and impracticality of the liberal arts curricula are not new. They did not begin with the cry for Black Studies in the late 1960's; nor was Carter G. Woodson the first to voice them in the mid 1930's with *The Miseducation of the Negro*; nor did these complaints first arise a decade earlier in the controversy between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. On the contrary, these complaints can be traced to the 16th Century A.D. They derive from the demise of the medieval university and from the concurrent destruction of holistic cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

With the current high rates of unemployment, black students have every right to be concerned about their future. They have every right to be disenchanted with the pedantry of liberal arts curricula—and with Black Studies as well, to the extent that it conforms to that curricula.

Philosophy has long been regarded as an impractical endeavor. Within the last five years, Black Studies has been placed in that category too. Students ask: What can you do with them?

The following presentation is offered as a partial reply.

What I will do briefly is discuss the goals of education and of philosophy and then give a rudimentary outline of how a philosophy-based curriculum for Black Studies might look.

THE GOALS OF EDUCATION

Education should, as Fela Sowande suggests, help each individual begin to address four fundamental questions: Who am I? Where am I? Why am I here? and How can I make the best of the fact that I am now here?

(1) *Who am I?*

One of the initial foci of the efforts of Black Studies practitioners was to provide black students with answers to this question through historical analysis and racial consciousness raising. The stock responses thus generated included "I am . . . Black, African, Afro-American, African-American, oppressed, proud, beautiful," etc. Yet to be explored are the more awesome possibilities inherent in this perennial question which point toward the multileveled nature of human existence.

(2) *Where am I?*

Under the rubric of Black Studies, limited responses to this question have conjured up visions of America: America as an empire founded on rape and genocide, a hardened cultural artery of Europe. Even more limited responses have produced images of ghetto, colony, prison, and concentration camp. While more expansive responses have offered the possibility of ecological perspective of the person in the context of the planet, the planet in the context of . . .

(3) *Why am I here?*

In or outside of Black Studies, this question has yet to be sufficiently addressed. The failure of parents, schools, and students themselves to fully probe this question has probably resulted in all manner of human addictions and afflictions.

(4) *How can I make the best out of the fact that I am now here?*

This question is being asked right now by students who are anxious about employment opportunities after they graduate.

Unfortunately, the fourth question cannot be answered until the other three are addressed. *The most practical skills anyone can ever acquire derive from an honest effort to answer these four questions.* Most of today's graduates will be involved in some kind of human service occupation. The most successful of these graduates will be those who are self-actualized, i.e., who have no illusions about who they are, why they are here, what this place is, and hence, how to manipulate it to their own end.

A positive self-concept is something one acquires from one's parents, and one's immediate environment by age six.³ Self-knowledge, however, has been traditionally acquired through the initiation process. In the West, formal educa-

tion and the initiation process no longer coincide and have not for almost four hundred years. Black Studies has at least the potential for bringing those two activities together again. And philosophy in the context of Black Studies would be a vehicle for this fusion.

PHILOSOPHY REVIVED

The first step toward making philosophy useful is to revive its purity. For the ancients philosophy was not discourse or the construction of prodigious lists of qualities and concepts. Philosophy was a personal, passionate striving toward a consistency with celestial and heroic archetypes, i.e., an effort to restore and reclaim those times when Sophia or Isis and the others were still around.

In order to understand what happened to Egyptian philosophy as it was being interpreted for a Greek audience, we have to read people like Robert M. Pirsig.⁴

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is one of the most devastating critiques of Western philosophy yet written. The book is all the more devastating because it was written by an insider. Pirsig weaves several themes together in a dramatic mosaic of self-discovery and the reconciliation of a father and son. However, for our purposes, it is his incisive discussion of our inherited Greek philosophy which gives lasting worth to his work.

To his credit, Pirsig is able to turn Rationality in upon itself demonstrating its genetic flaws. Pirsig, ever objective, even writes about himself, or at least the phantom of his former self, in the third person. This phantom whom he labels "Phadrus" was disassociated from the author by electric shock treatments following his nervous breakdown. The breakdown, we are told, was caused by the author's gradual realization that the seeds of the highest traditions in Western philosophical thought are rotten.

Pirsig spells out, in detail, the extent of the damage done to the teachings of the Wise Ones, the Sophists, by the likes of Plato and Aristotle. These Wise Ones were teaching the science of creative living. Their teachings were not based on rigid doctrines but on the livingness of the situations they encountered. And in the context of that livingness they espoused certain principles. These principles have come down to us in several forms, one of which is the seven hermetic principles or keys which can be discovered at the root of the most profound teachings among all peoples. These keys are:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| I. MIND | The ALL is MIND: The Universe is Mental. |
| II. CORRESPONDENCE | As above, so below; as below, so above. |
| III. VIBRATION | Nothing rests; everything moves; everything vibrates. |

- IV. POLARITY Everything is dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degrees; all truths are but half truths; all paradoxes may be reconciled.
- V. RHYTHM Everything flows out and in; everything has its tides; all things rise and fall; the pendulum swing to the right is the measure of the swing to the left; rhythm compensates.
- VI. CAUSE AND EFFECT Every cause has its effect; every effect its cause; everything happens according to Law; Chance is but a name for Law not recognized . . .
- VII. GENDER Gender is in everything; everything has its Masculine and Feminine principles . . .^{4, 5}

Philosophy for the ancients was not constituted by the self-contained and often mutually exclusive branches and sub-categories of contemporary philosophy. Contemporary Western philosophy has five basic branches: ethics, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics. The philosophy of the ancients had seven overlapping layers, divided for convenience but not as academic territorial preserves.

These seven layers, representing a synthesis of all learning, were:

1. METAPHYSICS —the nature of Being and of God, of Knowledge, and of Truth, of Energy and of Creation, of Divine and Human relationships.
2. LOGIC —the Rule of Reason.
3. ETHICS —the Code of Conduct.
4. PSYCHOLOGY —the Science of Soul.
5. EPISTEMOLOGY —the Nature of Knowledge.
6. AESTHETICS —the Urge to Beauty.
7. THEURGY —the Living of Wisdom.^{5, 6}

If we were to design a philosophy-based curriculum for Black Studies, it would be based on these seven areas.

A PHILOSOPHY-BASED CURRICULUM FOR BLACK STUDIES

METAPHYSICS should provide a basic understanding of the primary assumptions and fundamental beliefs of Blacks as manifested through their words, artifacts, and deeds; the extent to which the hermetic principles were and are a part of these assumptions and beliefs; the consistency of these with the beliefs and

assumptions of other traditional cultures; and the extent to which these assumptions and beliefs have been absorbed by modern doctrines and scientific speculation.

LOGIC should include a survey of ancient science: the science of numbers and the correlation of numbers with letters; the sciences of colors and tones and their effect on humans; the correlation of colors and chemical elements; the correlation of planetary movements to human psychological states; the study of how systems work: divination, biological, economic, political, astronomical, and/or social; language usage and the hieroglyphic tendencies in even today's black language usage; the relationship of mythology and history; and the relationship of mind and body in health and illness.

ETHICS should include the resurrection of proverbial usage; movement toward more than mere situational ethics, toward the more complex conscious decision making based on individual conscience, perhaps using Lawrence Kohlberg's model, this does not preclude a common code of conduct based perhaps on the Egyptian Negative Confessions; life and living provide students with the real lessons (conscience is memory); should emphasize principle of cause and effect (Law of Retribution).

PSYCHOLOGY should include a study of the nature of consciousness, the mind of the Eastern and Western psychoanalytic theories; conscious functions; the "collective unconscious"; archetypes; projections; the psychological evolution of mankind; the Masculine and Feminine Principles; the nature and function of mythology; the birth of the conscious mind; the rise of patriarchy; the function of the Hero; archetypes and contemporary Blacks; and experiential learning.

EPISTEMOLOGY should include modes of inquiry; survey models of Ouspensky, Tutuola, Freire, Castaneda, and others, investigate Levels of reality, e.g., for each of Barbara Ann Teer's five categories of Blacks; the nature of ideology, its use and abuse, relativity of scientific truths.

AESTHETICS should include active participation is one artistic form or some creative endeavor, e.g., dance, carving, sculpture, basketball, drama, sitting in silence, painting, cooking, drawing, cornrowing, interior decorating, print making, clothes designing, writing, singing, preaching, plowing, fasting, etc.; the study of the harmony of color, textures, and tone in the architecture and artifacts of traditional societies; and the science of harmonious living.

THEURGY literally means bringing the gods to bear on human affairs. It implies putting to use all the knowledge acquired and principles absorbed through exposure to the other six layers of philosophical pursuit. In form, this may be

theurgy of a Gabriel Prosser or of a Nat Turner. Or it may mean institution-building. Or vegetarianism . . .

It may also mean applied research—research which takes into consideration and respects folk concerns about enumeration, privacy, family, integrity, etc.

Or it may mean a cessation of all the traditional social science research which has been visited on black communities. Such studies often reveal only obvious, common sense information.

CONCLUSION

What this curricular outline suggests is that Philosophy in Black Studies can be used to integrate the arts and the sciences with self-development. It suggests that the principles for harmonious existence are not that dissimilar for an insect colony as for plant cells as for a human city; and that physics and chemistry are different from dance and nutrition only in degree but not in kind.

Moreover, this outline suggests the type of relationship between Black Studies and the liberal arts envisioned by Lerone Bennett. Bennett has argued that ultimately Black Studies must “establish moral and cultural authority over the whole.”

NOTES

¹ Edward W. Blyden, *African Life and Customs* (London: C. M. Phillips, 1908); V. C. Mutwa, *Indaba, My Children* (South Africa: Blue Crane Books, 1965), pp. 433–503; and D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longmans Green Co., Ltd., 1965), pp. 41 and 92.

² H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

³ E. Earl Baughman, *Black Americans: A Psychological Analysis* (New York: Academic Press, 1971), pp. 37–55.

⁴ *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam, 1974).

⁵ *The Kybalion: The Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1904).

⁶ Manly Palmer Hall, *First Principles of Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, Inc., 1949).

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