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Thoughts on Dussel's "Anti-Cartesian Meditations"

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Abstract: This is a commentary on the article "Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origins of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity" by Enrique Dussel published in this issue of the journal. The author argues that Dussel's argument raises several important considerations in the study of the epistemic and normative presuppositions of European modernity.

The argument of Dussel's "Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity" (as appears in this issue of the journal, trans. by George Ciccariello-Maher) is as follows:

Modern philosophy preceded Descartes's seventeenth-century reflections on method, certainty, and the centering of the *Cogito* by more than a hundred years in the writings of the Latin American Jesuits (or those Spanish Jesuits who spent time in the New World) who inspired his thought. They include Francisco Suárez (1548–617) and Francisco Sánchez (1551–1623), as well as the Jewish philosopher Gómez Pereira (1500–1567), who wrote philosophical works on metaphysics, method, and doubt, printed in many editions by the time of Descartes's birth. The formulation of *Cogito, ergo sum* is not original in Descartes, as is known by any historian of philosophy who took the

time to read St. Augustine's *City of God* (book XI, 26). Although Descartes claimed not to have been inspired by St. Augustine, the evidence, Dussel argues, suggests otherwise. In fact, Descartes seems to have offered his ideas as though they came to him willy-nilly, without the influence of his Jesuit teachers. Suárez's impact, for instance, led to the prioritizing of mathematics as a model of abstract reasoning. Descartes diverged from his teachers, however, who understood the importance of philosophical anthropology—that is, the human question—as the central concern of first philosophy. This divergence had the catastrophic consequence of offering models of science made supposedly rigorous through the expulsion of human elements. The dehumanization of the human world, marked by the disunity of soul (*cogito*) and body, became the model of this turn. This premise of disunity was al-

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ready receiving concrete manifestation in the presupposition of the Christian European as reality purged of supposed embodied vices of emotion and passion in a philosophical anthropology of the truly human as this disembodied Christian European archetype. The first sustained critique of this view was issued by Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), whose struggles on behalf of the Amerindians required also a philosophical anthropology that respected their humanity and, in so doing, raised the question of the human being anew in ways that responded to the de facto violence of the emergent modernity. As a critique of the dehumanizing elements of that modernity, Las Casas's arguments entailed a political philosophy in which legitimation emerged *from* the people instead of through a logic imposed on them. This legitimating practice brought into suspension the presuppositions of unquestioned truth and offered, in its stead, *critique*, including immanent critique. That the legitimating question posed by Las Casas required asking the Amerindian points of view require engaging the thought of such indigenous American thinkers as the Quechuas Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (1535–after 1616), who argued that the indigenous peoples of the Americas represented the better elements of Christian values than the European Christians who conquered them. There has, in other words, always been a critique from what Dussel calls the Under-side of [European] Modernity, and it involves the challenge to the presuppositions of that modernity when the humanity of its underside is brought into focus.

Dussel's argument raises several important considerations in the study of the epistemic and normative presuppositions of European modernity.

I write *European modernity* to bring into question the presumption of modernity's only being European. Understood as a relational phenomenon, modernity could be read in terms of what human beings in a given region consider to be the future direction

of humanity. In this sense, ancient Kmt, known today as Egypt, once represented the modern. So, too, did Babylonia, Athens, Rome, Holy Rome (Constantinople), Andalusia, Ottoman Turkey (Istanbul), and then "Europe." This story is complicated by unique convergences and transformations as the conquered fused with the conqueror often into something new. Thus, out of Greco and Roman conquest of West Asia and North Africa emerged Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, which led to Christendom through Constantine's conversion in the 4th century, and a shift in thinking as the cyclical cosmology of the northern Mediterranean was fused with the eschatological one of West Asia. The Muslim conquests of Christendom represented its own future as a new modern until the "Reconquest" in 1492 shifted the terrain from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and inaugurated the epistemic ruptures of which Dussel writes. This new development is a transition from a theological naturalism (Christendom) to a secular ethnos (Europe) with a new development.

The logic of an old metaphysics of substance was brought to bear on the new problematic of human difference outside of the framework of Christian, Muslim, and Jew. Along with this new problematic of constructing a philosophical anthropology attuned to experiences of unfamiliar (though ultimately not genuinely radical) difference was also a conception of time that marked *this* modernity in ways different from other modernities—namely, the notion of unfolding, linear, and progressive time. This temporal scheme needed to account for its normative outcome without its original source—namely, the benevolence or at least expectation of G-d. As singular and linear, the presupposition of uniqueness emerged, and the result is a shift from *a* modernity to *the* modern, to *modernity itself*, came about as presumably isomorphic with European reality. In effect, Europe became metonymic of

modernity.¹

A fallacy, however, is the presumption that indigenous peoples became frozen in a premodern condition from which they wait to be reawakened as either relics of the past or ghosts of the present as other-than-modern.² It is fallacious because it presumes a limbo status, a form of coma, of indigenous peoples and their thought. That they continue to fight and to think throughout makes them always *present* in this modernity. They are thus neither premodern nor postmodern but through-and-through modern. They exemplify, in a sense, what Paget Henry, drawing upon the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois, calls the potentiated double consciousness of humanity's global modernity.³

1. This portrait emerges in a variety of ways in a broad spectrum of thinkers, in addition to Dussel. See, e.g., Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001); Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (eds.), *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

2. I offer a more detailed critique of this fallacy in Lewis R. Gordon, "On the Temporality of Indigenous Identity," in *The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity*, edited by Michelle Harris, Martin Nakata, and Bronwyn Carlson (Sydney, Australia: UTSePress, 2013), pp. 60–78; "Justice Otherwise: Thoughts on uBuntu," in *UBuntu: Curating the Archive*, edited by Leonhard Praeg (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2013); see also my brief critique of primitivism and temporal displacement in my entry, "Race," in Mark Bevir and Naomi Choi (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, Vol. 3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2010), pp. 1133–1141.

3. See Paget Henry, "Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications," *The C. L. R. James Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005): 79–112. For Du Bois's treatment, see 11W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Conservation of the Races* (Washington, DC: The American Negro Academy, 1898); *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903); *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1940);

Double consciousness, according to Du Bois, had two stages. The first is the perception of the self through the eyes of the hostile or dominating Other. In Dussel's analysis, this would be the conception of Amerindians and Africans as posed by Ginés de Sepúlveda (1489–1573), who argued against their humanity. The acceptance of Sepúlveda's position, especially by indigenous peoples, would be the first form of double consciousness, since they would have been aware of the Spaniard's perspectives and theirs as the construction of the negative point of view. Potentiated double consciousness comes to the fore, however, from seeing the errors of those two initial perspectives, through subjecting them to critique and drawing out their contradictions. This, in effect, is what Las Casas and Guamán (among others) did: a Spaniard and a Quechua both rejected the first stage of double consciousness through addressing the important missing premise—the humanity of indigenous peoples. Du Bois would also put it this way: the first form of double consciousness made indigenous people into problems. Potentiated double consciousness identified the problem of doing that and offered instead an understanding of the people as *facing problems instead of being them*. The obvious problem they faced was the assault on their humanity posed by conquest.

The critique of European modernity also required two additional elements, the first of which is addressed in Dussel's essay and the second of which only receives a hint of possibility through his evocation and questioning of Emmanuel Levinas. The first is the epistemic-metaphysical presuppositions that led to what Frantz Fanon called the attempted murder of man or, more properly, humanity. We could call this correlate of colonialism and conquest *epistemic coloni-*

and *John Brown* (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs & Co., 1909), and for more discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4, "What Does It Mean To Be a Problem?," pp. 62–95.

zation, against which, with Dussel as inspiration, there emerges what Walter Dignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres call the *decolonial turn*.⁴ The focus of that turn or, as Mignolo recently articulated it, *option*, is epistemic decolonization. The second consideration pertains to what I shall here call *normative decolonization*. It demands a radical critique of the normative presuppositions of Euro-global modernity.

To understand the second critique, in effect a form of decolonial critique of practical reason, consider these thoughts posed in the South African context, which, I hope will be evident, has much resonance for the Amerindian one. There is much discussion today about the normative term *uBuntu* used across the various indigenous ethnic groups of South Africa and now adopted, as well, among some of the post-apartheid people of European descent. The term is defined thus by P. Mabogo More:

In one sense *ubuntu* is a philosophical concept forming the basis of relationships, especially ethical behaviour. In another sense, it is a traditional politico-ideological concept referring to socio-political action. As a moral or ethical concept, it is a point of view according to which moral practices are founded exclusively on consideration and enhancement of human well-being; a preoccupation with 'human'. It enjoins that what is morally good is what brings dignity, respect, contentment, and prosperity to others, self and the community at large. *uBuntu* is a demand for respect for persons no matter what their circumstances may be.

In its politico-ideological sense it is a principle for all forms of social or political relationships. It enjoins

4. See Maldonado-Torres, *Against War and Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

and makes for peace and social harmony by encouraging the practice of sharing in all forms of communal existence.⁵

Read as an indigenous concept, discussions of *uBuntu* are often straitjacketed by discourses of authenticity, traditionalism, and even primitivism. Yet a brief interrogation of More's definition reveals its peculiar relevance to *modern* debates, including a unique challenge to the metanormative status of certain dominating concepts of Euro-modern thought. For example, the claim of the universal translatability of the English word *justice* is an extraordinarily presumptive one. Is *justice* as John Rawls and many of us in the English language use it really identical to the ancient Greek word $\delta \iota \kappa \eta$ (*dike*) or, when engaged philosophically, $\delta \iota \kappa \alpha \iota \sigma \upsilon \nu \eta$ (*dikaiousune*)? Or how about the Km.t or ancient Egyptian word 𓄜 (*maat* or *ma'at*)? As we offer the variety of normative concepts with which to examine the proper ordering of a society, why couldn't one bring to the table the normative ideals, that to which to aspire at the societal level, from the elements of a society that reaches out and attempts to speak to the rest of humanity? In other words, what might emerge from the question not of the justice of *uBuntu* or whether *uBuntu* is a form of justice but the *uBuntu* (or other Amerindian concept) of justice?⁶

This rather unusual formulation to some should rightfully suggest a point of

5. P. Mabogo More, "South Africa under and after Apartheid," in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 149 and 156-157. A variety of expanded definitions are offered in Drucilla Cornell and Noyoko Muvangua (eds.), *Law in the Ubuntu of South Africa* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

6. For a brilliant study of this question in the context of Amerindians in Colombia, especially with regard to challenges of human rights, see Julia Suárez Krabbe, "At the Pace of Cassiopeia Being, Nonbeing, Human Rights and Development" (Roskilde, Denmark: Roskilde University School of Intercultural Studies Doctoral Thesis, 2011).

continuity and differentiation. For it would be correct to say there are points of normative convergence of justice and *uBuntu* (and varieties of other indigenous concepts in Africa and the Americas), but the extent to which they are identical should occasion pause. I say this for the same reasons of consideration with 'dike' and 'ma'at' (although *ma'at* is closer to *uBuntu* than *dike* because of its significance also for *truth*). Here, I am drawing on an insight from the famed Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, who in his excellent and underappreciated *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, argued simultaneously for universality and specificity through focus on the human capacity for communication.⁷

Although not all cultural concepts are translatable—that is, there isn't complete linguistic isomorphism across human languages—it doesn't follow that their meanings cannot be *learned*. Anyone who has acquired language can in principle learn a concept from another language *in its own terms*. Thus, the significance of *uBuntu* is not so much a matter of definition, although that intellectual exercise is not short of importance, but of *understanding*. If this is correct, then a question posed to patrons and matrons of justice is this: could they not be defending a concept offered as universal when it is in fact particular? If so, this may mean that some of the indigenous concepts as continued critiques of Euro-modern normativity—like the challenge of potentiated double consciousness—is broader in scope, more universal, than justice. This is not to say that justice does not offer its necessary conditions in the arena of normative human life; it is to say that while necessary, it may be insufficient precisely because it is blind to its own hegemonic conditions. It is possible, for instance, to talk about justice without once prioritizing the humanity of the subjects to whom it has been historically misapplied. That is why modern European con-

quest and colonization could assert themselves ironically often *in the name of justice*. To respond that such efforts were false justice is, in many ways, to beg the question of justice's scope. There may be a point at which a different term is needed to evaluate justice, and that one may require attunement to the human reality by which that critique could emerge. We see here, then, the human question coming to the fore with the normative question.

Dussel's closing lamentation—"Levinas remains inevitably Eurocentric, despite discovering the irrationality of the totalization of modern subjectivity, since he could not situate himself in the exteriority of metropolitan, imperial, and capitalist Europe"—could also be formulated as an encomium on what needs to be done when justice is not enough. The radicality of this additional decolonial turn, which will no doubt point to the political actions needed to address the human being who continues to suffer under the weight of a profoundly and inhumanly imposed system of justice, demands interrogation into the normative when justice is, at the end of the day, not enough but beyond which waits the better underside of human life.

7. Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

