

IS PHILOSOPHY BLUE?

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In what follows, Lewis Gordon theorises the nodes of intersection between philosophy and blues music and in so doing argues that blackness, as a philosophical and rhythmic condition, signals both the universal and the modern.

I here offer a portrait of the blues as a philosophical medium. A critical way of looking at the world from the perspective of the African diaspora, what, we may ask, can we learn from looking at philosophy in blue?

There are many ways to talk about the blues. Here are two. First, the blues is a form of black music. That is pretty well known. Second, the blues is a condition that transcends music. The music is, in other words, an expression of the blues. A philosophy of the blues, or perhaps blues philosophy, is more concerned with the latter.

That blues music is known as a form of black music already occasions some of the pathologies of dealing with things black in western academic thought and research. As W.E.B. Du Bois observed in *The Souls of Black Folk* more than a century ago, to speak of that which is created by black people is almost always to address not only problems but also the realities of people treated as problems themselves. No wonder black people have the blues. In North America, the ascription became metonymic, as the late Amiri Baraka's eponymic book *Blues People* attests.

Part of the problem, however, is (sorry for the awkwardness) the problem's failure of problematisation.

To illustrate, Jean-Paul Sartre had spent some time with Richard Wright in Harlem during his visit to the United States in 1945. Sartre purportedly asked Wright to tell him about 'the Negro problem'.

'What Negro problem?' Wright responded. 'There is no "Negro problem". There's a white problem'.

We could carry Wright's insight to the presuppositions of thought in relation to people and things black. The presumption is that black music must be a particular, even more—specific—kind of music bereft of universal significance. As black music, the blues encumbers the burdens of a presumed particularity awaiting the illumination of universal analysis.

The result of this presupposition is at least two misconceptions: the first is that because it is black, blues music is trapped in its own particularity, which means it can only offer that which refers back to itself—which is invariably *experience*. This makes the music in effect unreflective in that, simply as experience, it suffers from trying to figure itself out. Its metanarrative is thus not a reflective one, until, of course, it receives the universal light of theory and analysis and receives meaning. The music thus suffers from a peculiar crisis of legitimacy at the level of thought: it could only express and attempt to but never justify itself.

The second result is at the heart of the logic of particularity and universality. Du Bois, in his discussion of double consciousness, noticed that what is often called 'particular' tends to include the contradictions of society. Thus, the effort to construct the dominant and the normative 'pure' often involves disassociation, rejection, disavowal, and denial of so-called 'dark' elements of society. In effect, the dominant claim to universality is often premised on a false assertion; namely, its universal scope through simply ignoring what transcends it. The presumed particular, however, requires

admission of just that, which means attunement both to its limitations and transcending them. In effect, the former requires an artificially limited reality and the latter demands admitting the artificiality of that limitation. In effect, it means the so-called particular is at times more universal in scope than the proclaimed universal. Let us call this *potentiated double consciousness*.

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The message to be learned should now be obvious. That blues music, as black music, may actually be more universal than avowed or proffered classical and modern music, though in truth such comparison is like contrasting apples and oranges without remembering the nutritional value of both. It may be so not only through an incorporation of the elements of avowed universal music but also through reaching into territories the latter dare not venture. The first claim to universality is simply a formal consideration. The second, more complicated matter emerges when we reflect on *what* blues music is about and also what the blues are about. Before exploring that, we need take an additional consideration on the formal question of blackness and the blues.

The formal argument of metareflective admission of contradictions could be called a 'dialectical' argument. It advances knowledge through acknowledging moments of false universality. There is, however, something more at stake in this reflection. It also points to the limits of dissociative and nonrelational models of thought. The metaphysical critique here is against what could be called the notion of 'self-contained substance'. The idea that there could be a self-sustained

thing as the ‘really real’ is one best reserved, in this critique, to the gods. The alternative model admits *relationality*, where the reality of a thing is a relationship it has with other series of relations. This relational view means that there is always another side of thought to be considered in every act of thinking; there is, in other words, a contingent and dark side symbiotically related to and serving as a condition of all thought. If this is correct, then purification rituals are futile efforts of self-denial, cultivations of false security, evasions of reality, or, simply, bad faith.

By bad faith, I mean the effort to evade freedom, to hide from responsibility, through investment in a version of the self and reality that is not only false but also such that one seduces oneself to believe what one ultimately does not believe. While often examined at an individual level, the concept is such that it always requires a bad relationship with evidence (a very public, appearing phenomenon). To make oneself believe what one does not believe requires taking oneself out of a relationship with evidence through investing in contradictory activity such as ‘non-evidential evidence’, ‘relations of no relations’, and so forth. In effect, evidence, which is a social phenomenon, loses its sociality. Bad faith wages, in other words, a war against social reality. It also attacks human existence as relational.

As to exist (from Latin, *ex sistere*) means to stand out, to emerge, to appear, bad faith is an attitude of disappearance, either of the self or of others. In either version, there is the attempted eradication of relationality. These aspects of bad faith lead, further, to a profound struggle with the body and embodiment, for one cannot appear except through being somewhere and other things cannot appear without that to which they appear also having a point of view. In effect, then, bad faith, although studied as a condition of consciousness,



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is also that of the body by virtue of the inseparability of consciousness, embodiment, and freedom: it is, in other words, always *bodies in bad faith*, and as they live in a world sullied with incomplete selves, malleable and immalleable things, the relation to all without seeming closure, the realisation of purity as a projected ideal instead of reality.

This conclusion of bad faith’s attacks on relationality turns much of Western thought on its head. For Plato, as we know, was antipathetic to the shadows, which he regarded as mere appearance to be overcome through insight into purified reality. From the perspective of potentiated double consciousness, that would actually be a flight *from* reality instead of an emersion into it. Real things, after all, cast shadows. Philosophy,

in other words, would in this sense exemplify a form of neurosis.

This neurosis is, however, also insightful. It is a story told not only about the dark side of reality but also about the aspirations understood through the metaphor of unshackling. At the heart of the purification project is also one of liberation and freedom. The error, however, is to make this flight one *from* the relationship with the broader dimensions of reality to its form alone. Perhaps a different kind of relationship is called for?

This last question brings forth an understanding of why the blues emerged out of blackness, why, as Louie Armstrong used to lament, and Ralph Ellison pondered in *Invisible Man*, there was so much blackness in blue or the blues.

The blackness that contextualises the blues is, after all, one of a peculiar misery wrought from a philosophical anthropology gone mad. The modern world, premised on the expansion of an old theological order into a global secular one, led to whole groups of people having to ask, as Frantz Fanon observed in the penultimate chapter of *Les damnés de la terre* [*The Damned of the Earth*, but known in the English translations as *The Wretched of the Earth*]: (1) In reality, what am I? This question, I have shown in my books *Existential Africana* and *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, leads to at least two additional ones: (2) Could I ever be liberated from dehumanizing misery?, and (3) Are my questions justified? Do I make sense? Generalised, this becomes: What are we? What is freedom? Is reason possible, and if so, does it even make sense?

The dehumanisation of black people—not only in the form of many being forced into the status of property but also in many being subjected to the legacies of presumed subhuman status—makes the first query

a logical consequence. It also makes sense that people who were enslaved, colonised, and subjected to social conditions of disenfranchisement would reflect on the meaning of freedom. And finally, it makes sense that people whose efforts to question their condition are often challenged in the form of their supposed intrinsic lack of capacity to question their condition, would be concerned about problems of justification.

Oddly enough, this portrait of blackness is similar to the fundamental tenets of philosophical reflection. Philosophy, after all, begins with questioning, and such questions lead inevitably to the metareflective one of the questioner and her or his capacity and legitimacy in making such an effort. This identification of a link between blackness and philosophy raises an additional consideration: both, after all, are born of dissatisfaction and the experience of standing on shaky ground.

Blackness faces a problem, for example, of legitimacy and psychoanalytical melancholia. By this, I mean the formation of its identity through a process of loss without the clear experience of ever having what is lost. To be black is to be a rejected site of normative life in the modern world with the realisation of being indigen-ous to that world. As there was no reason for people to have considered themselves black before the set of forces that brought blackness into being as a negative term (that is, in relation to people, seen as *not* black, standing as higher or more valued beings), all blacks ultimately face the condition of not belonging to the only world in which they could possibly be indigenous. This contradiction raises a condition of blackness in the modern world, one that is nothing short of blue.

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One must ask, however, why such a plight would be characterized by a word also designating the color blue? Debra Devi, in her *Huffington Post Arts & Culture* article ‘Why Is the Blues Called “the Blues”?’ speculates its origins in the 17th century English expression ‘the blue devils’, referring to intense effects, even hallucinations, from severe alcohol withdrawal—in other words, a killer hangover. (Think, also, of ‘the Jones’ in reference to heroine withdrawal.) The expression was eventually shortened to ‘the blues’. This account doesn’t explain, however, why the color blue was used in the expression ‘blue devils’. Blue, as we know, could refer to something positive such as ‘blue skies’, but darkened, it also refers to that moment before evening turns to night. Cultural history could also point to the use of blue among West African ethnic groups, where it could refer to the regal (when bright) and in its indigo form to mourning (see, for example, Catherine E. McKinley, *Indigo: In Search of the Color that Seduced the World*). What is clear is that the blues emerged when these worlds, African and European, converged in the new world in conditions of misery whose reverberations echo to the present. This adds a dimension, perhaps psychoanalytical, to the European premise of drunken after effect: the high of modern exploitation and profit wreaked the low of the morning hangover; reality always has its price.

This reading makes not only blackness modern but also its correlative values and expressions. In this sense, blackness speaks to something that modern life may reject but find unable to avoid—namely, its relation to elements it prefers to discard. If this is correct, then the affective expression of this reflection is indeed the leitmotif of modern thought. Attempting to overcome its contradictions, to make itself complete and one with itself, leads constantly to epistemic rupture, ontological dependence (relationality), and the ethical

onus of responsibility for the meaning, maintenance, and transformation of each. The project becomes extra-systemic, and this realization leads to a transformation of modern humanity from what could be called expectations of childlike naivety of a consistent and neat world (a perpetual party, no?) to the adult sensibility of paradoxes, contradictions, and life’s unfair burdens. What else is that but the blues?

The blues tell us, for instance, that what is reasonable to take on isn’t always rational. Racism, as those who suffer it experience and understand, is never reasonable but always offers itself as coldly logical and always, to the chagrin of many analysts, rational. As Fanon puts it in his provocative essay ‘Racisme et culture’: ‘The racist in a culture with racism is ...normal. He has achieved a perfect harmony of economic relations and ideology in his environment.... Race prejudice in fact obeys a flawless logic. A country that lives, draws its substance from the exploitation of other peoples, makes those peoples inferior. Race prejudice applied to those peoples is normal’ (my translation). Someone (other people) is always wrong.

These reflections thus already point to that second sense of the blues, which challenges philosophy to be such that it deals with some of the contradictions posed by logical argumentation (validity) that is not always reasonable. Philosophy, it reminds us, if true to itself, must be radical in its reach, which means it must also be self-questioning and thus confront its relationship to those elements, whether mythic or rhythmic, that it erroneously attempts to avoid.

In this sense, philosophy, at least in its modern incarnation, has every reason to sing the blues, and it may be more true to itself when its possibilities are explored through the resources of blues people, those who, given this unfolding analysis, are no less than

modern people. The blues, in other words, is the leitmotif of modernity.

We could go further, however, as we saw in our early reflection on Plato, and read his evocation of philosophy as facing an opportunity to learn from the blues but in effect fleeing it. Evading the blues, in other words, pushes philosophy on a neurotic path akin to the effort of colonising reason through constraining it to the dictates of instrumental rationality. Reason, in other words, demands even encounters with, as Fanon observed in the 5th chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs* [*Black Skin, White Masks*], unreasonable reason. Addressing such a seemingly contradictory phenomenon ironically calls for reasonable action, and to make it more apparent, doing so *reasonably*.

Fanon, ironically, faced such a situation in his early reflections on the blues. As he reflects in ‘Racisme et culture’:

Thus the blues, ‘the slave lament’, is presented for the admiration of oppressors. It is some stylized oppression returned to the exploiter and the racist. There is no blues without oppression and racism. The end of racism is the death knell of great black music.... (my translation)

This is an extraordinarily asymmetrical reading of the blues. The error Fanon makes here is the fallacy of causal permanence, where the conditions that lead to the appearance of a phenomenon become those by which the latter are maintained. Born of suffering, the blues, according to Fanon, could only be maintained by that specific malediction. Thus the white who listens to the blues is, in Fanon’s reading, entertained by the suffering his political location has created. Yet this would mean that identification with an aesthetic

production requires an intimate link to its emergence. Many people, however, not only enjoy music that is not intimately linked to their personal experience but also attach their own experience to music born of a different one. Another’s suffering social misery could be artistically personalized and enjoyed in terms of one’s personal suffering. As Kierkegaard’s famous depiction of the poet in *Either/Or* attests, we are referring to

An unhappy man who in his heart harbors a deep anguish, but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and cries which pass over them are transformed into ravishing music. His fate is like that of the unfortunate victims whom the tyrant Phalaris imprisoned in a brazen bull, and slowly tortured over a steady fire; their cries could not reach the tyrant’s ears so as to strike terror into his heart; when they reached his ears they sounded like sweet music. And men crowd about the poet and say to him, “Sing for us soon again”—which is as much as to say, “May new sufferings torment your soul, but may your lips be fashioned as before; for the cries would only distress us, but the music, the music is delightful.”

Kierkegaard’s description points to the beauty of poetry and music born of suffering, but he doesn’t answer the question of why the reader or listener is able to identify the beauty as such. There must be something that *connects* the audience to the performance. It is not only black people who sing the blues and listen to it. *Many other people do*. There are nonblack people listening to the blues in Australia, Brazil, China, India, Korea, Russia, everywhere. I very much doubt all of them imagine themselves as enslaved blacks on cotton and tobacco plantations or those occupying prison cells

in an unfair criminal justice system. To understand this, one would have to delve more deeply into what the blues are. Suffice it to say here that the earlier arguments about double consciousness, potentiated double consciousness, and the dark-side of theory pertain to the blues: all address dimensions of life that must be confronted though difficult to accept. In that regard, they reveal, as we have seen, the particularity of misconceived universals, and in doing so, paradoxically transcend their own particularity into a more universalising practice. Thus, while born of black suffering, the blues speaks *to modern suffering itself*. It thus speaks to anyone confronting the entrails of modern existence, and since that also relates to postmodern existence, transcends its specificity. As Ellison put it in *Shadow and Act*:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

The blues is about dealing with life’s suffering of any kind. Because of this, it is, again as we have seen, the leitmotif of modern life. Black people, we should remember, were produced by the modern world. Their aesthetic production speaks to the age as do few others. We need only think through the many musical manifestations of the blues that have permeated the 20th century and continue into the 21st such as swing, jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, rock n’ roll, beguine, mambo, salsa, samba, rock steady, reggae, calypso, samba, and,

now, hip hop. Though this list seems disparate, all have roots in some blues form. Moreover, there are aspects of the blues that exemplify their own aesthetic sensibility. Blues music is full of irony. Its sadness exemplifies an adult understanding of life that is both sober and, ironically, sometimes happy. It is a non-delusional happiness often marked by self-deprecation and critical evaluation, the kind of happiness or good humor that is a realization instead of a diversion. It is the beauty of moonlight versus sunshine, although the blues dimensions of a sunny day could be understood through our realisation of how much could lurk in what is hidden in plain sight. Think of the numbness one seeks from alcohol and the reflection offered by the blues, that numbness gets one nowhere.

All blues productions remind us that life is not something to escape but something to confront. And it does so in its very form. The classical blues structure is full of repetitions, for instance, that reveal new layers of meaning about the cyclical nature of life. And in this structure, although a story is retold, it is understood at different levels; the effect of which is cathartic and after which is a renewed understanding of the point of origin. The blues agent thus takes responsibility for her or his existence, and in doing so can also transcend its conceptual framework in flights of imagination. This dimension of blues performance, marked especially in bebop, whose genealogy points back to the blues, did not always amuse white patrons of black exoticism, an observation that Fanon did not fail to notice. He reflects in *Les damnés de la terre*:

A memorable example, and one that takes on a certain importance because it is not entirely about a colonial reality, was the reaction of white jazz experts when after the Second World War new

styles such as bebop established themselves. Jazz could only be for them the broken, desperate nostalgia of an old nègre [Negro or “nigger”], taken with five whiskies, cursing himself and the racism of the whites. As soon as he understands himself and the world differently, as soon as he raises hope and forces the racist world to recoil, it is clear that he will blow his trumpet to his heart’s content and his husky voice will ring out loud and clear (translation mine).

Bebop transcends the misery of blackness fetishised by white critics and consumers of blackness into the genius of raising the bar and possibilities of musical performance.

So we return to some elements of blues form, structure, and performance. We should not, however, reject so easily what could be called ‘the blues wail’ or ‘moan’. It is not only an expression of suffering but also a reflective one. It transitions, in other words, from the prereflective to the level on which there is metastability and self-reference. This means, then, that the blues calls to something often overlooked as an aspiration of blues people, something manifested beautifully in bebop, which we could, by extension, consider as an anxiety of modern life: aesthetic and ethical maturity. Racism is a form of degradation that attempts to bar certain people from rights and privileges of adult life, such as the dignity of images of self-worth, while contradictorily blaming them for their lack of access to these conditions. That is why people who become objects of racism are treated as perpetual children, people under guardianship of a supposedly adult race. There is the problem of insult evident here, but there is an additional consideration to bear in mind: the degraded subjects *are adults*. They are thus faced with

adult responsibility while being treated as immature subjects. This frustrating situation has an existential dimension if we were to reflect on the conditions of enslaved peoples who made daily ethical decisions, were aware of doing so, but suffered the designation of being property. Nearly every blues performance and lyric brings out this contradiction. How could one be responsible for so much over which one does not have control?

We see here the primordial distinction between how things appear and what they are. But the difference isn’t always very clear. There is repetition in the blues, but each re-instantiation of a theme is uniquely significant. There is repetition without being the same. It is usually at a point where there is a chord shift in terms of the music (moving to the dominant fifth) where revelation occurs. This moment of revelation is often ironic in that it points back to the singer or subject’s role in the condition at hand. We could call this ‘an assertion of adult sensibility’. Here the blues artist, after outlining the conditions of suffering, and also embodying the suffering itself, raises the question of agency and responsibility. I call this adult sensibility because it points to a central moment in development that all parents at some point, as parents, reveal to the child who must now grow up: Life is rarely fair, and one must, often, improvise.

Regarding the latter: That improvisation is a hallmark of black music. An important element of improvisation that is often overlooked is that it is not random and the improviser faces responsibility for each creative formulation. As with jazz, melody, harmony, and rhythm set the stage for what could no longer be expressed with words. It signals to the call, always, to express the seemingly ineffable.

With regard to the former: One of the difficult things about the relationship of reason to justice involves what to do with injustice. There is much injustice with which life's continued struggle must contend. To cry out loud against this injustice is not simply a revelation of wrong but also an acknowledgment of having been wronged. To do so as a wail or moan is to assert the value of self—for if one were not valuable, why should anyone be concerned with what has transpired?

The blues thus brings from the inner-life of the afflicted also an axiology of defiance, and what else is there that emerges from that but one of the most feared offenses of racially dominated subjects—namely, dignity.

Much of blues performance, whether through music, written texts (such as those by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, among so many others) and ironically so in those of Frantz Fanon, because of his at first being critical of the blues, brings forth the human struggle for dignity to levels political and metaphysical. That the upheavals that constitute modern life threw so much of humanity into uncertainty makes it no wonder that this sensibility reaches from Siberia to New Zealand, Canada to the campsites of Antarctica, and around the planet from Brazil to Angola to Vietnam.

I could go on, but in this short discussion, I simply want to close with the opening query. Philosophy, when it reflects on its condition, cannot help but be blue, for, as Karl Jaspers observed in *Philosophy of Existence*, it is a long hymn to Reason, but such a beloved is, as we know, one who does not always behave.