

Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher

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The thing about Biko that appealed to me is that he doesn't conform to the standard Freedom Fighter image. Mandela might have been more topical but ... he is very much in the tradition of Kenyatta or Nyerere, leaders of political movements. Steve Biko was much of a philosopher (Fawkes cited in *The Sunday Star* May 31 1992).

Introduction

One of the curious features of African intellectual life in South Africa is, as is the case with Afro-Caribbean philosophy, 'the near absence of an explicitly cultivated philosophical tradition' (Henry 2000:xi). South Africa has produced a number of internationally acclaimed African literary, social, religious and political figures whose works are full of philosophical insights and arguments. Yet this country has apparently not produced African philosophers of the same calibre and comparable to internationally well-known African philosophers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, Odera Oruka, Kwame Anthony Appiah, or V.Y. Mudimbe,

If Africans in South Africa and those in Diaspora were able to produce poetry, literature, political theories, or theological doctrines, why not a philosophical tradition of note? It is indeed among the very same literary, political or theological figures that African philosophical minds are embedded. One major reason for their invisibility is that African philosophy

has mainly been 'an intertextually embedded discursive practice and not an isolated or absolutely autonomous one' (Henry 2000:2). From this intertextual perspective, African philosophy becomes an open but diverse discursive field in which ontological, epistemological, ethical, moral, social, political and especially existentialist traditions emerge. These traditions, defined by the peculiarities and actualities of the South African lived experiences, have been fashioned and sustained in, for example, the novels, the protest literature (especially of the 1970s and 1980s); autobiographies and poetry of many African writers. It is in these genres that the existentialist tradition as a strong philosophical tradition may be found¹.

There is an ongoing tendency in certain quarters of locking African thinkers and their productions in the biographical moment and political activism. Biko was to some extent a victim of this practice². But he defies the simple reduction to a politician or activist by assuming other equally important identities. He also combines the cultural, the political and the philosophical in the same person. He and his comrades espoused what has normally been described as a philosophy. Hence Biko himself, together with commentators, spoke of 'the philosophy of Black Consciousness' (Biko 1996:92; Ranuga

¹ In his classic, *The African Image* (1962) E'skia Mphahlele, for instance, strongly rejects Leopold Sedar Senghor's concept of 'negritude' from a literary perspective. However, he agrees with Senghor's philosophical interpretation of 'African humanism', a theme that occupies pride of place in his literary texts and constitutes the basis of his epistemology in his *Towards a Humanistic Philosophy of Education* (1982) with further developments in *Education, African Humanism & Culture, Social Consciousness, Literary Appreciation...* In 1977 Mazisi Kunene gave a lengthy interview on the meaning and practice of African Philosophy in South Africa which was followed by a publication on *'The Relevance of African Cosmological Systems to African Literature'* (see Luchembe 1977; Kunene 1980 in Jones). See also Motshekga (1983), which in a profound way anticipated Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987).

² A substantial number of writings on Biko focus mostly on the political aspect of his thinking and a few on his thoughts on culture and politics. In this respect, see for example Fatton (1986); Pityana, Ramphela, Mpumlwana & Wilson (1991); Halisi (1999); Ranuga (1986); Nteta (1987); Gibson (1988); Hemson (1995); Ahluwalia and Zegeye (2001).

1886:186) or the 'Black Consciousness philosophy' (Halisi 1991:100f; Ranuga 1986:182). Paradoxically, very few people referred to Biko, popularly known as 'the 'father' of the Black Consciousness Movement' (Ahluwalia & Zegeye 2001:460), as a philosopher. Themba Sono (1993:90), for instance, describes Biko as 'a formidable and articulate philosopher' a philosopher not in the usual academic sense of a university professor, but more precisely a man of theory and action, an 'organising philosopher' (Sono 1993:102); perhaps a sort of social and political lay philosopher. However, to merely describe someone as a philosopher as Sono or Richard Fawkes in our epigraph do, is merely to state a generality without specificity. Therefore, this paper, following on Lewis Gordon's extensive phenomenological work on Frantz Fanon³, seeks to locate Bantu Steve Biko within the philosophical terrain, more pointedly, the Africana existentialist tradition. The aim, in short, is to constitute Biko to be part of what Benita Parry (1996:12) has described as the attempt 'to disclose the dead victim's ... [philosophical] claims'.

Africana Existentialist Philosophy

What is Africana existential philosophy? To understand what this philosophical tradition is we need first to explain what the broader term Africana philosophy is. The phrase 'Africana Philosophy' was coined and popularised by Lucius Outlaw (1996:76) as:

a 'gathering' notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc) and traditions of the same, of African and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the sub-discipline—or field-forming, tradition-defining, tradition-organizing reconstructive efforts which are (to be) regarded as philosophy

In other words, Africana philosophy is for Outlaw (1996:77) an 'umbrella' term 'under which can be gathered a potentially large collection of traditions of practices, agendas, and literature of African and African-descended peoples'. Under this umbrella may thus be included literature, poetry, political

³ For more on Fanon the existential phenomenologist, see Gordon (1995; 1997, especially chapter 2); and Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White (1996).

writings, philosophical texts, art, or proverbs, of Africans on the continent and Africans in Diaspora. It is an intertextually embedded philosophy that draws from a multiplicity of sources of black intellectual production. Such a philosophy, as Lewis Gordon (1997:6) explains, 'addresses problems across a wide range of philosophical and social issues', a shared concern by Africans and peoples of African descent over issues such as imperialism, colonialism, slavery, racism and resistance to them.

By virtue of the historical fact of racial oppression, colonisation, and slavery, Africana philosophy raises questions of identity and liberation by focusing on the reality that African people are a black people and hence are affected by the significance of race and racism. The raising and articulation of the existential questions of identity and liberation within the context and framework of the situation of black people, constitutes what has recently come to be known as 'Africana existential philosophy'. Although European existentialism and Africana existential philosophy may share certain common characteristic such as concerns about 'freedom', 'responsibility', 'anguish', or 'bad faith', they nevertheless differ in that the former is a philosophy inscribed with ideological nuances which in its particularism purports to be universalistic. In other words, it is fundamentally a European historical phenomenon dealing primarily with the history of European literature. Africana existential philosophy, by contrast, deals with issues of the emergence of black selfhood, black suffering, embodied agency, freedom, racism and liberation, in short, it deals with *being-black-in-the-world*⁴. In Gordon's (2000:8) view, these questions of problematic existence and suffering animate the theoretical dimensions of black intellectual existential production. Africana existential philosophy, therefore, consists in reflections, rooted in black experience, on the boundaries of human existence and the utilization of such reflections to challenges confronting African and African-descended people in Diaspora.

As part of Africana philosophy, Africana existential philosophy raises

⁴ For the existentialist category of 'being-black-in-the-world' see for example Manganyi who has over the years articulated a humanist existentialism that found its most profound expression in his seminal text, *Being-Black-in-the-World* (1973). See also his other existentialist texts (Manganyi 1977a; 1977b; and 1981).

questions concerning primarily two themes: identity and liberation. Identity questions are in the form: 'Who are Africana (Black) people?' or 'What are Africana people?' In other words, at the subjective level, the questions combined may become 'Who or what am I?'. The *who* of identity, Gordon argues, generates questions about selfhood: 'Who am I?'. The *what* in identity takes on an ontological demand about questions of *being*, *essence*, and the existential question of meaning, namely: 'What am I?'. This is the ontological question about black identity in an antiblack world.

Liberation, on the other hand, is purposive or teleological in nature. Its concerns are directly connected to the demands of 'ought' or 'why'. Accordingly, as Gordon points out, whatever we may be, the point is to focus energy on what we ought to become. There is, therefore, a convergence between questions of identity and questions of liberation; they intersect at the question: '*Who* is to be liberated?' Put differently, an epistemological turn constitutes the intersection between the ontological and the teleological. To know what we ought to do requires knowing who we are, and to know who we are we frequently have to discover what we ought to be doing. These concerns are symbiotic concerns that point values at the heart of *being* and forms of being at the heart of value. It is within this discursive field of Africana existential philosophy that Biko claims his philosophical space.

Philosophical Influences

As a philosopher, his concern was not with theoretical abstractions, but with the concrete and existential struggles which shape human—especially black—existence, what Fanon in chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) describes as the 'lived experience of the black', *l'expérience vécue du noir*. Indeed, Fanon constitutes the pillar of Black Consciousness. Both Fanon's classics, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) became the grounding texts of the Black Consciousness philosophy. Biko's text, *I Write What I Like* testifies to Fanon's influence on him. Besides the numerous references to Fanon in the text, some of the chapter titles of Biko's work directly echo Fanon, for example, 'Black Souls in White Skins?', 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for Humanity', or 'White Racism and Black Consciousness'. When asked by Gail Gerhart about the thinkers who influenced his thinking, Biko responded: 'people like Fanon, people like

Senghor They spoke to us, you know. These people were obviously very influential' (Interview, October 24, 1972). An indication of Fanon's deep influence on the thinking of Black Consciousness is further expressed by Barney Pityana, a very close comrade of Biko, who approvingly cites Fanon at length:

'I am not a potentiality of something' writes Fanon. 'I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It IS. It is its own follower'. This is all that we blacks are after, TO BE... This, therefore, necessitates a self examination and rediscovery of ourselves. Blacks can no longer afford to be led by and dominated by non-Blacks (Pityana in van der Merwe & Welsh 1972:180).

Hence, as Turner and Alan observe, it was no accident that Fanon's philosophy proved to be relevant to the liberation struggles of the Black Consciousness Movement, for, 'It was Fanon who had ... deepened the Hegelian concept of self-consciousness and in his sharp *critique* of 'reciprocity', denied that there is any reciprocity when the relationship of Master and Slave has the additive of color' (Turner & Alan 1986:38).

Fanon was of course not the only dominant existentialist figure in Biko's thinking; Sartre's name also features quite regularly in Black Consciousness. For instance, alluding to Sartre's concept of freedom and its implications for speaking out without fear, Biko himself notes: 'There is no freedom in silence Sartre discovered this to his dismay' (Biko 1972:10). Invoking Sartre's concept of freedom and responsibility, an anonymous article in the *SASO Newsletter* (1972:7) states:

We have to imprison ourselves in the ideal of humanity. Humanity is beyond freedom. To be human is to be more than free. Freedom is subservient to humanity although Sartre believes that man is *condemned* to freedom; but I would hastily add that he is condemned to responsibility too, which is a human attribute.

In an interview with Lindy Wilson, Mandela Langa reports 'We read

Marcuse, we read the existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre' (in Pityana et al. 1991:28). Finally, as Sam Nolutshungu (1983:156f) observed, there was an evident 'interest in existentialism, phenomenology, and philosophical psychology ... a philosophical preoccupation with 'being', with explicit citation of Sartre, and with social guilt, after the philosophy of Karl Jaspers' in the Black Consciousness Movement led by Biko. Unfortunately, as in our epigraph, Nolutshungu's claims about Biko, Black Consciousness and philosophy were mere assertions rather than demonstrations of the philosophical content of Biko's ideas. In what follows an effort is made to tease out some existentialist categories from Biko's writings. Within the confines of an essay such as this one, it is impossible to pay attention and do justice to all the categories contained in Biko's thinking. Hence the focus will mainly be on the following themes that best articulates the concerns of Africana philosophy of existence. First, is the articulation of Biko's conception of antiblack racism; second, and connected to the first will be his conception of black identity within the context of the antiblack apartheid society; third, the question of liberation from racism, then finally and closely connected to the question of liberation, is the existentialists category of bad faith which is an evasion of freedom.

Biko, Black Consciousness and Racism

The fundamental categories in Biko's thinking are *racism*, *Blackness*, *consciousness*, *freedom* and *authenticity*⁵. These categories get interwoven to constitute a set of ideas that came to be called the Black Consciousness philosophy. For Biko, there is the primordial human being-in-the-world of pre-reflective consciousness. Arising from this ontology are two modes of human existence in an antiblack society such as South Africa, which are products of reflective consciousness: being-white-in-the-world (white consciousness) and being-black-in-the-world (black consciousness), what, according to Gordon (1995:131) is the 'qualitative ... knowledge of each consciousness' situation in a given society'. These two modes of being or 'ways of life' are dialectically related in such a way that they are contradictory yet dependent upon each other

⁵ Freedom and authenticity will be dealt with, derivatively, in the sections on 'liberation' and 'bad faith' respectively.

for their existence. Through various means—economic, religious, social, political, and legal—white self-consciousness subjugated and controlled black self-consciousness thus denying blacks their existential freedom.

But, as Sartre points out, human reality *qua* consciousness is by definition free; that is, consciousness *is* freedom. The emergence of Black Consciousness was therefore a response to a white consciousness that sought to appropriate and dominate the consciousness and thus the freedom of black people. It was and still is a struggle for a new consciousness, a reawakening of a self-consciousness, a re-appropriation of black self-consciousness from the clutches of an appropriative and dominating white consciousness, a rediscovery of the black self which lay buried beneath white consciousness imposed on blacks by cultural, political, economic, linguistic and religious domination. It is, so to speak, an 'affirmative action' on the self by the self, an affirmation not from the Other but from and by the self. Odera Oruka (1990:71) captures the essence of Black Consciousness thus:

- (1) a black man's [sic] awareness or realization that the world is infested with an anti-black social reality, (2) the black man's recognition of himself as black, as a Negro and to be proud of the fact, (3) the black man's urge to explain away or annihilate this social reality, and (4) move toward the creation of a new reality, a fair social reality as a condition for universal humanism.

Central to Biko's thinking is first and foremost the problem of racism, especially of the apartheid type. Nkrumah (1968:56) once wrote: 'Social milieu affects the content of philosophy and the content of philosophy seeks to affect social milieu, either by confirming it or by opposing it'. True to Nkrumah's words, the content of Biko's thought was affected by the apartheid racist social and political milieu, and he in turn, through his antiracist philosophy of Black Consciousness sought to affect the socio-political milieu by opposing it. Just as Karl Marx was 'created' by capitalism; Lenin by the Russian aristocracy, Gandhi by British imperialism, and Fanon by the colonised 'Wretched of the Earth' who were victims of white oppression, Biko was created by apartheid racism. His thoughts on racism then reflect that reality and should be understood within that context. This concern with the racial problematic fully situates Biko in the tradition of Africana existential

philosophy. As Gordon (2000:8) points out:

[R]acial problems serve a dominating role. In Africana existential philosophy, this reality has meant detailed explorations of this dominating factor in the lived experience of African people. It has meant an exploration of their lived experience of blackness.

Echoing Fanon and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure), Biko (1996:25) defines racism as 'discrimination by a group against another for the purpose of subjugation or maintaining subjugation'. First, to 'discriminate' involves acts of exclusion and inclusion, that is, certain practices; in this case, discriminatory practices. Accordingly, it is not enough to characterize racism as simply ideological. And, to 'subjugate' entails the notion of power. This leads to a conception of power which 'entails conflicts of vested interests' (Dyrberg 1997:2). To have power according to this conception, therefore, is to have 'power-over' or to have control over someone both of which are predicated on or originate in separation. 'This is because [power] secures compliance or control, or is a relation of dependence or a hierarchical relation of inequality' (Dyrberg 1997:2). A definition of this kind then is obviously one that indicates that power by controlling and dominating, establishes and maintains exclusionary relations of superiority and inferiority: racism. Taken within the context of apartheid and the extant power relations between blacks and whites within that system, Biko's definition restricts all acts or expressions of racism to white people. Biko (1996:65) constantly refers to whites as a group that 'wields power' or the 'totality of white power' (Interview with Gerhart 1972). Thus, black people cannot be racists because 'we do not have the power to subjugate anyone Racism does not only imply exclusion of one race by another—it always presupposes that the exclusion is for the purpose of subjugation' (Biko 1996:97f)

Power, as Goldberg (1995:13) indicates, 'involves control that can be exercised—at least in principle—over a person(s) or over resources—often over the former to effect the latter, or vice versa'. Racism, therefore, is not discrimination alone, but also the power to control the lives of those excluded. This power found its concrete exercise in apartheid white subjugation of the blacks through acts of control, domination, conquest, or defeat. In all these acts, power is also exercised in the promotion, execution and maintenance of

discriminatory practices. Indeed, Biko enjoys a lot of good company in restricting racism to the powerful, Stokely Carmichael, Manning Marable and A. Sivanandan, among others⁶. The latter, for example, defines racism in such a way that the focus is on practice and power: 'It is the acting out of racial prejudice and not racial prejudice itself that matters Racism is about power not about prejudice' (Sivanandan 1983:3).

The main concepts in Biko's definition of racism—racial 'discrimination' (exclusion/ inclusion), 'subjugation' (domination and control)—were informed and echoed by the main architect of apartheid, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in an attempt to justify apartheid or 'separate development' as he preferred to call it:

Reduced to its simplest form the problem is nothing else than this: We want to keep South Africa White ... 'keeping it White' can only mean one thing, namely White *domination*, not 'leadership' not 'guidance', but '*control*', '*supremacy*'. If we are agreed that it is the desire of the people that the white man should be able to protect himself by retaining White *domination*, we say that it can be achieved by separate development (e.a.) (Quoted by Bunting in La Guma 1971:28).

Biko's definition, therefore, without pretension to universality, captures apartheid racism as it is articulated by Verwoerd in the statement just cited. However, to the extent that apartheid was 'settler-colonialism' or 'colonialism of a special kind' this definition captures the kind of racism that one finds in a colonial situation. Power as conceived in this definition is not abstract and anonymous, but functions through state apparatuses and social and economic agencies.

Verwoerd's justification of apartheid racism above expresses one significant element of a racist consciousness: the idea of the 'opposite race'. In his racist consciousness, the black race is believed to be the absolute Other, an enemy and threat to the white race ('Swart gevaar'/ Black danger) against whom all whites must unite. It was therefore in the context of such racist

⁶ For detailed conceptions of racism as power relations see for example Sivanandan (1983); Hacker (1992); Marable (1996); and Carmichael and Hamilton (1967).

consciousness that Biko, in a similar fashion as Sartre, in relation to Negritude, articulated his conception of Black Consciousness in term of the Hegelian triadic dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Biko (1996:51,90) writes:

The overall analysis therefore, based on the Hegelian theory of dialectic materialism is as follows The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the *antithesis* to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance—a true humanity.

Black Consciousness as the negative moment of the dialectical progression in the struggle for black authentic existence was for Biko a necessary stage, a means towards freedom rather than an end in itself. Black Consciousness, he declared, 'would be irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society' (Biko 1996:87).

Biko's characterization of Black Consciousness in Hegelian terms notably and deliberately recalls Sartre's famous essay, '*Black Orpheus*', in which Negritude is described as an antithesis, the weak upbeat of a dialectical progression, a negative moment responding to white racism; in short, an 'antiracist racism' (1988:296). Even though Fanon launched a serious critique of Negritude, he also took exception to Sartre's view of Negritude. 'Jean-Paul Sartre' he lamented, 'has destroyed black zeal The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself' (Fanon 1967:135). Unlike Fanon, Biko endorses Sartre's conclusion because he probably realized that Sartre was speaking in methodological terms when he used the expression 'the moment of separation or negativity: ... antiracist racism' which is not, in this context pejorative at all.

Taking their cue from Sartre's 'antiracist racism' and placing a heavy accent on the last word '*racism*' many of those opposed to Negritude and Black Consciousness or any form of race loyalty or solidarity labelled them racist. Ruch, for example, interprets the antithetical moment (Negritude/ Black Consciousness) as racist. Referring to the blacks who espouse blackness, he writes:

In order therefore to find their identity as a race, they become

racialist in their turn, belittling their former superiors, burning what they used to adore, and showing by all means at their disposal that they themselves and not their oppressors are in fact the superior beings (Ruch 1981:201).

Besides the obvious inaccuracy of the claim, 'showing by all means at their disposal that they themselves and not their oppressors are in fact the *superior* beings', a distinction rarely made by most people like Ruch, is the one between 'racism' and 'racialism'⁷. These are often conflated to mean one thing, namely, the belief that one's race is superior to others and therefore has the right to dominate others. The two are however distinct and do not necessarily entail each other. A racist believes in the existence of races and that these races are different, both physiologically and even behavioural. Racialism by itself does not posit racial hierarchical value judgements about one race or another. It limits itself merely to distinguishing between races without attribution of negative or positive valuations. In this sense racialism is not necessarily, certainly not always practically, pernicious and to be opposed automatically. Even Appiah (1992:13), a great opponent of the concept of race acknowledges that 'Racialism is not, in itself, a doctrine that must be dangerous'. What distinguished racialism from racism is that in the latter, the superiority of one race over another is asserted. A racist, in other words, would not only say that there are different races, but also that certain races—especially one's own—are superior to other races. In other words, racism adds to racialism a hierarchically discriminating value judgement.

Sartre himself is guilty of causing this error by describing the 'moment of separation' as a kind of racism instead of racialism. For, it is evident from the context of 'Black Orpheus' that his intention was not to label the Negritude thinkers 'racist' in the usual derogatory manner. If he had meant to suggest that they are racist, that would imply that they not only had the power to dominate Europeans but also that they consider themselves superior to them; a claim neither Sartre nor the Negritudinists would defend. He makes this point clear when he asserts about Negritude:

⁷ For a similar distinction between racism and racialism see Mosley (1995:216-235); de Benoist (1999:20-23); and Outlaw (1996:8,18).

But there is something even more important in it: the Negro himself, we have said, creates a kind of antiracist racism. *He wishes in no way to dominate the world: he desires the abolition of all kinds of ethnic privileges; he asserts his solidarity with the oppressed of every color* (e.a.) (Sartre 1988:326).

It is clear from the above that to describe Negritude as 'racism' is inappropriate. Not all separatisms are necessarily racist. In the context of the situation of the blacks within an antiblack white world, black solidarity may not necessarily amount to racism. At best, it may be correctly described as 'racialism' which in and by itself is not dangerous, pernicious or racist. Indeed, Sartre's idea would make more sense if it were to be rephrased from 'antiracist racism' to 'antiracist racialism'.

The Question of Identity

Sartre's 'antiracist racism' idea also introduces two fundamental challenges confronting black particularistic doctrines such as Black consciousness: In Gordon's terms, the challenges amount to: 'First, can the struggle against racism avoid being racist? And second, can the achievement of black liberation avoid the elimination of the black race' (Gordon 1995: 4).

Biko is acutely aware of these challenges and attempts to confront them head-on. As early as his tenure as the president of the South African Student Organisation (SASO), Biko (1996:5) responded:

The fact that the whole ideology centres around non-white students as a group might make a few people to believe that the organisation is racially inclined. Yet what SASO has done is simply to take stock of the present scene in the country and to realise that not unless the non-white students decide to lift themselves from the doldrums will they ever hope to get out of them.

Again he observes: 'Some will charge that we are racist' (Biko 1996:97).

To Gordon's first question: Can the struggle against racism avoid being racist?—the answer for Biko is affirmative. His first and immediate response to this question is an echo of his conceptualization of racism as predicated upon power relations of exclusion and inclusion. Racism, in terms

of Biko's conception, is about power; hence, 'One cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate' (Biko 1996:25). Racism, Biko argues, is a prerogative of white people because the 'order of things' is such that white people throughout the entire world are in power. Since black people in South Africa had no power whatsoever, they could not be racist. As a matter of fact, Black Consciousness has never been espoused as a credo for subjugation and domination of whites. In this respect it differs tremendously with apartheid.

This might mean that an individual or a designated racial group A treats an individual or a designated group B in a racist manner only if A holds power over B and uses that power to discriminate against B on the basis of biological and physical differences. Since, in South Africa whites had power over blacks (at the time Biko was writing), then only whites could be racist and not blacks because the latter lacked power. This conception of racism is unacceptable to some people on the basis that 'The bitter, solitary old [white] bigot, alone in her room, is a racist for all her powerlessness' (Garcia 1997:13). The appropriate response to this objection would be the question: 'powerless' in relation to whom and as a member of which group? If she belongs to the dominant group, powerless as she may seem to be at that particular time, she however belongs to a group designated as a race that at that particular point in time possess power. Therefore the power she wields is the power derived from her membership in the powerful and dominant group. This power is expressed succinctly by Margeret Mead in her discussions about race with James Baldwin:

But you see, I've been on a plantation in New Guinea where I was responsible for a labor line. Now they were indentured labourers; they were grown men. You had two hundred men out of the bush. Some of them had been cannibals. Some of them weren't cannibals; some of them had just been good, fiery fighters. But they came out of a very, very primitive technical level of society....

Now, when I was temporarily alone, I had to run that labor line. I had to give them orders based on *absolutely nothing but white supremacy*. I was *one lone white woman*. Any one of them could have killed me, and it was my business not to get killed. *If anything happened to me, maybe twenty of them would have been killed* (e.a.) (1971:21).

White power in an antiblack world means that the life of a single white woman is worth more than two hundred black lives. This is precisely what racism means for Biko, that one single white woman can control and have the power of life and death over thousands of black people. We see this phenomenon even in our media: the blood of one single white farmer in Zimbabwe or South Africa, for example, makes the headlines of the press and is reflected on TV throughout the whole world than the blood of a thousand black workers in the same country. In short, Biko's concept of power translates into a demand by a single white woman that the black other justify his existence. Her existence is justified by the existence of the black other whose existence depends on her. In other words, she is her own justification, her own foundation, a Sartrean in-itself-for-itself, God.

Second, Black Consciousness for Biko was not racist because race does not play a part in the concept of 'blackness' as it was conceived. All people defined as races, other than whites were negatively referred to as non-whites. Their non-whiteness was their common identity within the antiblack racism of the apartheid regime that confronted them. It was this common identity and experience of racism and exploitation that led to the adoption of the term 'black' as a political identity to be worn with pride against a colour conscious apartheid regime. African, Indian and Coloured medical students at the University of Natal were forced to share common university facilities different from their white counterparts. Because of this common experience, —even though Africans, Indians and Coloureds in South Africa are perceived and still perceive themselves as racially different—the concept 'Black' was used as part of a set of constitutive ideas and principles to promote collective action. Defining 'blacks' Biko and his comrades in the South African Students' Organisation, insisted that the term refers to those 'who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the south African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspiration' (Langa 1973:9).

Black Consciousness was therefore not racial or racist in content but a socially and politically constructed identity in an antiblack society that perceives colour as the central marker of inferiority and superiority. In other words, 'black' became transformed to what in William R. Jones' terms is 'a designation of an antagonist' (Jones 1977-1978:153). There is a sense, therefore, in which to formulate a Black Consciousness philosophy is a

consequence and a tacit recognition of the fact that a philosophy that reflects or endorses a white consciousness dominates our experience. Thus, to call for Black Consciousness from this perspective is to launch an implicit attack on white racism. Besides, the term 'black' as a socio-political rather than a biological concept was for Biko not necessarily all-inclusive.

The fact we are all *not white* does not necessarily mean that we are all *black* If one's aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white (Biko 1996:48).

In Biko's dialectic, black consciousness is not only a response to white consciousness but also its product. The core of black identity, therefore, must be rooted in the same quality that is the basis for black subjugation and oppression, that quality which is the focus of the dominant group's perception: blackness. Black identity needed to be grounded in a concrete consciousness of the situation of being-black in an antiblack world. 'What blacks are doing' he asserts, 'is merely to respond to a situation in which they find themselves objects of white racism' and he continues 'We are in the position in which we are because of our skin. We are collectively segregated against—what can be more logical than for us to respond as a group?' (Biko 1996:25). This is a call for black solidarity and unity, a solidarity the kind of which Appiah would call racist.

Appiah posits two kinds of racisms, 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic'. Extrinsic racism is a belief that people of different racial groups possess certain characteristics that warrant differential treatment. Intrinsic racism, on the other hand, involves loyalty and preference of one's own racial group based on racial solidarity. Given Biko's insistence on the solidarity and unity of the black oppressed, that 'all blacks must sit as one big unit We must cling to each other with the tenacity that will shock the perpetrators of evil' (Biko 1996:97). Black Consciousness seems to fit Appiah's designation of intrinsic racism which is predicated on racial solidarity. The basis of Biko's black solidarity, on the contrary, lies in shared or common collective historical experiences rather than on shared biological or genetic characteristics

Even supposing Black Consciousness was 'intrinsic racism' as defined by Appiah, is 'intrinsic racism' really racism? One of the salient features of

racism as understood by Biko is not only power but also the belief in the given superiority of the racist group and the supposed inherent inferiority of the excluded and discriminated against racial group. It is this supposed inherent inferiority that provides the foundation of the power to subjugate. Black Consciousness, on the contrary, was black solidarity in the face of subjugation and domination, a solidarity of those and by those who were subjugated and certainly did not regard themselves as inherently superior to whites. Such solidarity cannot possibly be called racist even of the 'intrinsic' type.

If Biko's Black Consciousness is not racist, how then do we explain the exclusionary practice against whites as a race in the struggle for justice? He rejected integration. Was he then a racial separatist? Biko was both a (non)separatist and an (non)integrationist. As a separatist, Biko's argument was consequentialist because he strongly believed that given the apartheid circumstances, the only practical means to achieve freedom for blacks was through separation from whites. Hence the slogan: 'Black man, you are on your own!' Separatism, it is obvious, is for Biko merely a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Biko himself warns us of the conflation of the means-ends nexus that afflicts popular perception of Black Consciousness philosophy. In this respect, Biko's views resonate with the Pan-African Congress (PAC) policy. For both these tendencies, separatism is construed as a necessary strategic phase towards integration⁸. Biko, as I indicated was both a non-integrationist, as we have just seen, but also an integrationist. How is this possible?

Liberation

To Gordon's second concern: Can the achievement of black liberation avoid the elimination of the black race? Put differently: Can blacks become subjects instead of objects without losing their identity as blacks? Once again, Biko's response to this question is instructive. When Biko speaks of a 'synthesis' in the white/black dialectic, is he articulating a position that would lead to the elimination of both the white and black races? How would the 'synthesis' manifest itself—through assimilation or integration? Biko launches a scathing attack on liberals for confusing the antithetical moment of the dialectical

⁸ For different kinds of separatists, see McGary (1983).

progression with the synthetic moment, which they interpret as an expression of integration or assimilation:

For the *liberals*, the *thesis* is apartheid, the *antithesis* is non-racialism, but the *synthesis* is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution (Biko 1996:90).

But this integration, Biko insists, is a liberal ruse to foist white norms and values upon blacks and thus to achieve black assimilation into white culture, norms and values. The logical point here is that nonracialism cannot both be the antithesis and the synthesis of the dialectical process. The synthetic moment is a product of and therefore must be a higher expression of both the thetical and antithetical moments. To equate the antithetical moment and the synthetical moment is to arrest the process of change at a particular stage and thus to reproduce the *status quo* in a veiled and masked form. For, in this kind of integration as envisaged by liberals, the 'in-built complexes of superiority and inferiority ... continue to manifest themselves even in the 'nonracial' set-up of the integrated complex. As a result, the integration so achieved is a one-way course' (Biko 1996:20).

While Biko's view may not have been derived from Sartre's analysis of the liberal democrat in *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, it is however close to it in many respects. For Biko, just as for Sartre, the real target is precisely the liberals, the 'do-gooders' who in their defence of blacks or Jews, rescue them as (Western) human beings, but annihilate them as blacks. The liberal is as a matter of fact an assimilationist, one who wants blacks to be full members of humanity only if they renounce their blackness. In other words, black liberation would therefore mean the elimination of the black race. Speaking of the liberal democrat in relation to the Jew, Sartre (1948:46) writes:

'There is no such thing as a Jew, there is no such things as a Jewish question' he [liberal democrat] says. Which means that he wishes to separate the Jew from his religion, his family, his ethnic group, in order to plunge him in the democratic crucible, out of which he will emerge as a single and naked, an individual and solitary particle, just like all the other particles. This was known in the United States as the policy of assimilation.

Integration for Biko does not mean the assimilation of blacks into an already established set of values set up and maintained by whites. By assimilation generally, is meant the attempt to have one racial or ethnic group absorbed, physically and /or culturally, by another. The absorbed group takes on the defining characteristics of the absorbing group and renouncing its own racial or ethnic uniqueness and singularity. Black assimilation project is however limited because, unlike the Jew who can physically disappear within a white world, the black body is overdetermined from without. At the ontological level, therefore, as Gordon (1995:153) points out, assimilation, especially black assimilation is easily classifiable with hatred, for, '[i]t manifests a desire to eliminate the Other as Other—in other words, to create a world of only one *kind* of human being'. The liberal 'myth' of integration, which is, in fact, a form of progressive assimilation, Biko (1996:64) insists, 'must be cracked and killed' because it ultimately turns out to be an attempt to deny the culture of black people. To this extent, Biko was, in the words of Howard Mc Gary, also a 'cultural separatist' like Amiri Baraka and Moulana Karenga in the USA who believed that 'integration deprives black people of a culture that they already have or that they ought to regain because it involves the grafting of black people onto the white culture' (in Harris 1983:202). Biko, just as Baraka and Karenga, urged blacks to recover and maintain the positive aspects of their culture.

There is at a deeper level the means/ends problem that finds expression in the antithetical/synthetical moments at play. It is precisely this means/ends problem that ultimately sets Biko apart from both the liberals and the now ruling African National Congress party policy. For both the liberals and the ANC, integration *qua* nonracialism is both a means and an end. As a means integration (nonracialism) fails on two accounts. First, such integration is infested by inbuilt apartheid complexes of superiority and inferiority, which continue to manifest themselves in any such 'nonracial' movements, organizations or situations. As a result of such integration, power relations remain untouched. Second, this type of integration quite often suffers from internal strife generated by 'the lack of common ground for solid identification' (Biko 1996:21). To overcome these complexes resulting from 300 hundred years of oppression, 'a very strong grass-roots build-up of black consciousness' (Biko 1996:21) is necessary.

What kind of liberatory synthesis then does Biko conceptualise? It is

suggested that this synthetic moment in Biko's dialectics is nonracialism. What does nonracialism mean? Does it imply the obliteration or elimination of blacks and whites as 'races'? Is it a negation of the existence of 'races'? But to negate something is on the one hand to implicitly recognize its presence, in whatever form it may take. On the other hand to deny the existence of 'races', is in a significant sense to posit the unity and sameness of humanity.

The Bikoan synthesis is a kind of what in Lucius Outlaw's (1996:81) terms is a 'pluralist integration', an economically, politically and socially integrated society but racially and culturally distinct whilst not threatening the integration of the social whole by cultural distinctness. That is, integration for Biko (1996:24) 'means there shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society'. In a sense, Biko would reject Sartre's Hegelian invitation to look 'to the end of particularism in order to find the dawn of the universal' (Satre 1988:329). This invitation would be tantamount to giving a negative answer to Gordon's question: Can the achievement of black liberation avoid the elimination of the black race? Instead, Biko insists on a synthetic moment that preserves the interplay of unity and diversity, that is a recognition of difference within sameness, of the universal and the particular. Incidentally, this synthetic view would seem to avoid the 'bad faith' which Biko sees as one of the major problems emanating from racism; the full identification with my past to the exclusion of my future possibilities, my facticity to the exclusion of my transcendence, my body to the exclusion of my consciousness, or my universality to the exclusion of my particularity, or vice versa.

If nonracialism *qua* integration means the elimination of blacks as a race then, Biko emphatically declares, he would be totally against it. If integration means 'a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up and maintained by whites YES I am against it' (Biko 1996:24). For Biko, assimilation *qua* integration is not only to be rejected because it is the project of the liberals, but also because it leads to bad faith and alienation in blacks who strive for it. The black who tries to assimilate is inauthentic because s/he wants to deny her racial and social identity

Bad Faith

Fundamental to Black Consciousness is the problem of bad faith (inauthenticity) and its necessary consequence, alienation. In the antiblack

apartheid world bad faith is an 'effort to evade one's humanity' by asserting this 'humanity as what it is not' (Gordon 1997:124), that is, as either black or white consciousness. This view is a consequence of the principle in dialectical thought according to which a being realizes itself in direct proportion to the degree of its opposite; such that interiority, for example, is realized in direct proportion to exteriority, transcendence to facticity, or whiteness to blackness. So black consciousness is posited as the antithesis of white consciousness; a purging from black people of a consciousness that alienates them from who they are; not essentially but situationally. As Biko (1996:100) succinctly declares: 'I think Black Consciousness refers itself to the black man and to his situation'. This alienation has its origin in the antiblack racism that affects the black person from the cradle to the grave. Because of the injustices, differential treatments, inequality 'you begin to feel that there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that completeness goes with whiteness' (Biko 1996:101)

'What is the being ... of human reality in an antiblack world?' Gordon asks. The answer, he declares in a single phrase, is: *bad faith*. The concept of bad faith, popularised by Jean-Paul Sartre, basically refers to different modes of human existence characterized by self-deception, self-evasion, flight from one's freedom and responsibility and the acceptance of values as pre-given. Without delving deeper into the complexities of the concept as articulated by Sartre, and the different patterns bad faith normally assumes, suffice it to say with Gordon that located within the context of an antiblack world, bad faith is,

an effort to deny the blackness within by way of asserting the supremacy of whiteness. It can be regarded as an effort to purge blackness from the self and the world, symbolically and literally (Gordon 1995:6).

Bad faith, therefore, has to do with self-identity in the sense of one's reflective consciousness of who one is and what one is like. Such reflection is however unavoidable given that, as Sartre (1956:47) puts it, a human being is 'a being such that in its own being, its being is in question'.

Apartheid racism, Biko emphatically declared, is obviously *evil*. However, the tragedy of it all is that the victims of this vicious system, black people not only acquiesce in it but also participate in their own oppression.

This is because they deceive themselves into believing in the naturalness and givenness of their situation. 'What makes the black man fail to tick?' Biko asks in earnest. Because 'reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the "inevitable position"' (Biko 1996:28). However, deep inside, the black person knows that he is lying to her/himself for 'In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in the silent condemnation of white society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his master's impatient call' (Biko 1996:28). In the presence of the white person the black person assumes an attitude of pure facticity. He plays the role assigned to him by the master. He lives his situation by fleeing it; he chooses either to deny it or to deny his responsibility.

One of the tragedies arising from racism for Biko is the effect of self-negation which characterizes the black person's situation; '[T]he black man in himself has developed a certain state of alienation, he rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good, in other words he associates good and he equates good with white' (Biko 1996:100). Part of the source of this alienation, Biko believes, is the education system as whole, a system whose content a black child does not recognize herself in. This is a system that teaches the black child about Europe and Europeans to a point where 'we don't behave like Africans, we behave like Europeans who are staying in Africa' (Biko 1996:131). Fanon (1967:147) makes the same point thus:

The black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about 'our ancestors, the Gauls', identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth. There is identification—that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man's attitude.

In the South African case, 'the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries the truth to savages' was the supposed discoverer of the Cape of Good Hope, Jan van Riebeeck.

Also because of a developed sense of self-hatred, black alienation involves an attempt to flee one's black body, 'the way they make up and so on, which tends to be a negation of their true state and in a sense a running away from their colour; they use lightening creams, they use straightening devices

for their hair and so on' (Biko 1996:104). This attempt to play at not being black condemns them to a perpetual struggle of what Sartre calls 'impression management' which becomes a mark of the oppressed. The desire of the slave, the Jew or the colonized to become like the master, the anti-Semite or the colonizer is an avoidable consequence of the master-slave relationship, anti-Semitism or colonialism.

Oppression often makes blacks turn against their own in an attempt to flee and evade their blackness. They assert a white consciousness by adopting an antiblack standpoint on human reality. This they attempt to achieve in several ways. For example, seduced by the seeming nonracialism and equal treatment in liberal organizations, mixing with whites at wine, beer and tea parties in white suburbs, '(t)his serves to boost up their own ego to the extent of making them feel slightly superior to those blacks who do not get similar treatment from whites' (Biko 1996:23). What these blacks try to forget is that even in those 'mixed' circles, it is as blacks that they are received. In doing so, they lie to themselves because they know perfectly well that they cannot cease being black. They conceal from themselves the truth, which, despite their futile attempts to deny, they nevertheless carry in the depths of their being. By assuming an antiblack consciousness, by trying to flee from the black reality, by attempting to cut themselves off from the mistakes of their race, by making themselves judges of other blacks, they evince a consciousness in bad faith and lack of authenticity.

The other way in which antiblack consciousness manifests itself in blacks is when a black, because of the accumulation of white insults in his being, 'vents it in the wrong direction—on his fellow man in the township' (Biko 1996:28). This is normally called 'black-on-black violence'. Several reasons may be advanced for this phenomenon but one of them is certainly the fact that such a black 'may either be displacing his anger toward whites—he may be hiding from his own desire for white recognition ... [a clear example of bad faith]—or he may be avoiding the unbearable sense of humiliation of not being recognized by even the lowest denominator [black people]' (Gordon 1995:111).

What should blacks do to be authentic and avoid bad faith? The authentic black, in terms of Biko's Black Consciousness, should be conscientized—what Heidegger (1962: 317) might term the 'call of conscience' or Sartre's 'radical conversion'—to choose to be black in the face

of an antiblack racism. Conscientization is that process which brings to the consciousness of black people the task of taking charge of their destiny, of resolutely taking responsibility for who they are and the choices they make, of committing themselves to authentic possibilities, taking over their freedom, uniqueness and resolutely engaging in the projects through which they create themselves. Black Consciousness thus becomes the quest (vehicle) for authenticity.

By Way of Conclusion

This portrait of Biko as an Africana existential philosopher is neither exhaustive nor by any means an attempt to encase his identity within a single determinate essence. That indeed would be both difficult and unfair. The focus of this essay has been to break with the prevailing tendency of interpreting Biko's thinking singularly as political to the almost total exclusion of the philosophical. It is suggested therefore that as a radical Africana existential philosopher, Biko was simultaneously, like most radical Africana existentialists such as Fanon and Sartre, a critical race and liberation theorist.

Some people, especially mainstream and traditional philosophers, have contemptuously pointed out that Africana philosophers seem to be preoccupied with race, and that for them to make race their primary subject is, in the long run counter-productive, for it harms their image by portraying them as perpetual 'one-themers'⁹. Indeed, some of these critics even go to the extent of rejecting race as a legitimate philosophical problem by locating it in sociological or anthropological terrains. Undeniably, a considerable number of Africana philosophers are indeed 'pre-occupied' with race. But this is because following on Nkrumah's observation, philosophy always arises from a social milieu such that a social content is always present in it either explicitly or implicitly. The social milieu affects the content of

⁹ For interesting discussions of this attitude and events involving them see, for example Yancy (2004), especially the 'Introduction', and chapters 2 and 6; Yancy (1998); and Mills (1997; 1998). On the marginalization of 'race' as a legitimate philosophical concern see for example, Jones (1977-78), or Outlaw (1996).

philosophy, and the content of philosophy seeks to affect the social milieu, either by confirming it or by opposing it. Philosophy therefore is a product of the lived-experience of social beings. The reality of the social milieu of Africans and African-descended people is a racialized reality, hence the primacy of the racial problematic among black philosophers. A further problem about this objection is the assumption on the part of the critics that Africana philosophy is the sole preserve of a racially distinct group, namely, people of African descent. Not all contributors to Africana existential philosophy are black. "Africana philosophy" is meant to include, as well, the work of those persons who are neither African nor of African-descent but who recognize the legitimacy and importance of the issues and endeavours that constitute the philosophizing of person, African or African-descended and who contribute to discussions of their efforts' (Outlaw 1996:76). Besides Sartre, among the leading contemporary non-Black Africana philosophers are: Robert Bernasconi, David Theo Goldberg, and Nigel Gibson

As though responding to the above critics, Sartre—a paradigmatic case of a non-black Africana philosopher—in his *What is Literature?*, responds to the question 'For whom does one write?' by giving as an example Richard Wright, the African-American novelist's writings:

If we consider only his condition as a *man*, that is, as a Southern 'nigger' transported to the North, we shall at once imagine that he can only write about Negroes or Whites *seen through the eyes of Negroes* Can one imagine for a moment that he would agree to pass his life in the contemplation of the eternal True, Good, and Beautiful when ninety per cent of the negroes in the South are practically deprived of the right to vote?...

If we want to go further, we must consider his public. To whom does Richard Wright address himself? Certainly not the universal man. The essential characteristic of the notion of the universal man is that he is not involved in any particular age, and that he is no more and no less moved by the lot of the negroes of Louisiana than by that of the Roman slaves He is a pure and abstract affirmation of the inalienable right of man. But neither can Wright think of intending his book for the white racialists of

Virginia or South Carolina whose minds are made up in advance and who will not open them (Sartre 1988:78).

The dilemmas of a black philosopher are therefore different from the dilemmas of, say a white philosopher. The black philosopher's problem is about recognition as a human being, denied precisely because she/he is not regarded as a full person. This recognition matters to the black philosopher precisely because the Other exercises power over her/him thereby limiting her/his possibilities. Had it not been for this power relation, the Other's recognition would certainly not matter at all. So the black philosopher's preoccupation is to attempt to convince the Other that s/he is not merely a sub-being or thing but a person and therefore deserved to be treated as such. The '*I AM*' of the black philosopher will thus be different, 'it will be relational, not monadic; dialogic, not monologic; one is a subperson precisely because *others*—persons—have categorized one as such and have the power to enforce their categorization' (Mill 1998:9). Africana existential philosophy is therefore inherently oppositional and liberatory.

Even though Biko nowhere provides a sustained and systematic articulation or treatise of a traditional philosophical nature, his writings contain numerous philosophical insights and ideas from which it is possible to draw together an account of a philosophical outlook. Such a philosophical outlook, we have suggested, is an Africana existentialist preoccupation with 'being-black-in-an antiblack-world' and questions of 'black authenticity' and 'black liberation'. He realized that liberation of any kind required an authentic consciousness of self, for, as he avers, 'we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage' (Biko 1996:49). Like Fanon, Biko recognized one right only, a right that led to his untimely death: 'That of demanding human behaviour from the Other' (Fanon 1967:219).

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