

May 4, 2007

- **“How Black is Blue?” (Continued). Paul Taylor’s Response to Rudinow (and Rudinow’s Response)**

In answer to Rudinow’s final points he raised towards the conclusion of his article, concerning “what is crucially and universally *human* about [the blues’] central themes” (416), which (according to Rudinow) would undermine the objection that whites can play the blues, Taylor complains that such claims as above paint too simple a picture:

[T]he main difficulty with [Rudinow’s] approach is that he misunderstands the cultural forces acting to constitute the subject positions from which the BBA [Black Blues Authenticity Thesis] may be articulated, and so misconstrues the possible forces and intent of the claim. (418)

Relying on Dewey’s theory of works of art as being primarily phenomena that take place in the public sphere, and manifest a collective and sustained (strengthened and intensified) emotional quality from its spectators¹, as well as sociological notion of ‘racial space,’ Taylor responds:

[C]andidate blues performances in which white participants fail because the BBA adherent is unconvinced that the performer can properly bear witness to the racialized moral pain that the blues is about. (419)

This racialized moral pain is derived by his some cryptically and technically stated claim:

[T]he response-dependent property of being perceived as black [is derived from]... the counterfactually specifiable susceptibility to certain forms of discrimination and insult that follows from it. (419)

In other words, the racial space is ringed by such a (relational) property in which the African-American primarily perceives himself or herself in terms of “being black” based on the *response* elicited by his or her interaction with someone who is not black. Martin Luther King wrote that he looks forward “to a time in which one is judged by the content of one’s character, not by the color of one’s skin.” This aspiration of King is an example of the negation of such a response-dependent property. In this case, one is being judged in terms of one’s character, so the person perceives him or herself primarily in this light—as an individual with a moral character and a conscience—and not as a black or a white person.

Counterfactual statements, in their conditional form, always take the subjunctive mood. In other words, a counterfactual conditional is phrased as:

¹ “Artworks for Dewey are experiences that art objects participate in and occasion, distinguished from other kinds of experiences principally in that they intensify and clarify certain features common to those experiences...[after all] [e]xperience in general is made up of situations, or contextual wholes, within which events take on meanings in relation to their antecedents, consequences, and immediate qualities.” (418)

If it were the case that p , then it would be the case that q .

...where p and q are the antecedents and consequents of the usual conditional variety:

If p , then q .

The connection with the response-dependent property and counterfactuals is clear. Certainly, when a white person behaves or responds in a certain way that makes the African-American aware of his or her blackness, certainly he or she can't help but wonder: "If I weren't black, would s/he have acted that way towards me?"²

It is precisely with these justifications that Taylor argues he is not advancing a (reverse) racist position (in response to Rudinow's objections to the proprietary argument, pp. 413-414) nor he claim he needs to appeal to some notion of 'racial memory' (of past and present wrongs) somehow passed on through racial bloodlines. After all "fairly pedestrian sociological commonplaces will suffice." (420) In other words, the above counterfactually-based scenarios, reinforcing this response-dependent sense of self perception of being black, are indeed commonplace, they occur all the time, whether or not a white person even notices or cares to notice.

Since it is safe to say that incidences of these kinds are usually fraught with negative connotations and associations, the blues have drawn from and continue to draw on this font of 'racialized moral pain.'...in this regard, "blues songs are tragic, not pathetic." (419)

[W]e [can] read the blues idiom as a racial project that depicts the black race as a social category whose members are oppressed, insulted, and burdened with diminished life chances, but who still persevere and struggle....[then] attempts to universalize cultural practices in this country have all too often amounted to attempts to diminish and ignore the worth of the culture within which the practice began ...there is *not* anything crucially or universally human about the blues if the idiom is a racial project. (419-420)

Rudinow of course responds that all Taylor's construals are rather question-begging:

Taylor's BBA adherent listener is a 'subjectivity'—a term of art ...[h]owever much we may be 'constituted *as* social beings' (i.e. in terms of our social roles and identities)...I want to maintain that we are all—performers, audience members, theorists alike—still 'persons', or less abstractly, 'human beings'[Taylor's] argument will have to do better than the mere suggestion that the blues might be about what contemporary and historical African-Americans have in common uniquely ...It will not do simply to assert in a question-begging way that there is not anything crucially or universally human about the blues. (422)

So here we have an example of an impasse (recalling Jeff Jordan's article). Some of the resulting discussions seemed to reflect this impasse.

The basic issue stemmed from what could be described (as Taylor writes above) the first-hand familiarity with this specific kind of "racialized moral pain" stemming from the above

² Or translated in the above counterfactual form: "If it were the case that I am not black, then it would be the case that that [non-black] person would not have acted that way towards me."

mentioned response dependent property of perceiving oneself as black, and the associated counterfactual self-questioning. **Jasmine Tirado §0207**, **Callie Douthit §0207**, **Katrina Taschman §0207** all basically agreed with Taylor's main point that such a first-hand experience translates into an authenticity when playing this art-form that just can't be transferred outside the racial boundaries. In other words, certainly poetry and universal appeal to suffering might be necessary conditions for blues-playing, (in other words, if you play the blues authentically, then you're using poetry and drawing on universal themes of suffering), but are they sufficient? **Lauren Grimes §0202** drew the analogy here with respect to the previous issue discussed (preferential hiring) in terms of the issue of 'response-dependence.' (How one perceives oneself based on how a prospective employer perceives the prospective employee.)

Almita Phillips §0206 offered the useful analogy concerning having a white professor in her African-American studies class wouldn't convey to her the same degree of credibility than an African-American professor. The analogy with the blues has to do with this first-hand experiencing of the particular kind of racialized moral pain that no white professor, no matter how well-versed and educated on the subject, has or therefore can relate to tacitly with people who do experience this. (The analogy seen more generally is reminiscent of the problem of 'qualia' discussed often in the philosophy of mind. For instance, someone born colorblind may know all there is to know *about* the color 'red', but we'd still maintain s/he wouldn't *know* red first-hand as someone actually experiencing the color.) **Christina Stennett §0206** responded however that she had a white professor who taught African American studies very effectively, due in large part because of his growing up somewhat predominantly immersed in an African-American community.

Christina's example is useful also because it is analogous to the 'hard case' discussed already last week, concerning the white person growing up in and identifying himself or herself primarily with an African-American community. Rudinow would certainly make the case that such an individual, due to his or her avowed *ethnic* affiliation, could certainly play the blues effectively. On the other hand, because of this person's skin color, *outside* the community he or she would be treated differently in a manner not having direct access to the "racialized moral pain" that his black counterparts would experience. So according to Taylor, he could only be considered as part of this racial experience to a certain qualified degree, thus diminishing his or her qualifications to play the blues effectively.

Others questioned the link between racial moral pain (whether historical or contemporary) and innovation. **Oneg Pruitt §0207** and **David Cimino §0207** for example emphasized that the character of the blues is robust enough to accommodate innovation, development, and creative interpretation from those who aren't African-American. Echoing this point, I mentioned that Jewish Klezma music has certainly developed and seen much innovation beyond its Eastern European origins, being played and enjoyed in many places around the world by Jews and non-Jews alike. Someone like Taylor would probably argue in the same manner: that the suffering experienced by Jewish people past and present stemming from anti-Semitism would put a limit on how Klezma could adequately be played by someone not having first-hand experience with this version of 'moral pain.'

Others raised insightful methodological objections. **Shelby Watson §0207** questioned the reductionist enterprise attempted by these authors to 'fix' notions that seem to be based so much on subjective aesthetic experience. How adequately can one make an analytical argument postulating in such general categories like 'moral pain' and its relation to effective playing and appreciation? Music seems irreducibly particular in this respect. Making general claims about its so-called authenticity and effective playing and interpretation and appreciation seems suspect.

Marcel Pierre-Louis §0202 also brought out the interesting distinction among moral, aesthetic virtue versus virtuosity. Someone can play the blues with great skill (virtuosity) and it may not translate into a moral or aesthetically virtuous experience, and vice versa. **Marcel** strongly agreed with **Shelby**'s points that a general reductive scheme seeking to specify authenticity in the case of music seems like a hopeless task. There are too many confounding and particular factors at play.

I offered some analogies concerning this question, dealing with other recent musical forms. In particular, I raised the issue of Rap music and Heavy Metal Rock music. Rap, like the blues, certainly had its roots in 'moral pain' and associated reaction against socioeconomic discrimination and police brutality as experienced in urban areas (arising from the East Coast...early groups to hit mainstream airplay like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, as well as Public Enemy, emphasized predominantly revolutionary themes and activism.) Yet Rap music, and all its associated amalgamations and spin-offs, has become a truly global phenomenon. Does rap music from Ghana, or for that matter from Azerbaijan³ have any less 'authenticity' than its East Coast roots? Heavy Metal music's origins and (in a market-driven sense) target were primarily middle, to upper-middle class white teenagers experiencing the associated angst and alienation of suburban "culture." Yet African-American groups like In Living Color were among the most outstanding Heavy Metal performers, often coopting in their lyrics issues dealing with urban culture and socially revolutionary themes, as in the case of Rap music. Do groups like In Living Color play Heavy Metal in fashion less effectively and authentically as their white counterparts?

Adil Zahman §0202 objected to the analogy, insofar as one associates Rap and Heavy Metal primarily with studio performances, while the Blues is usually thought in terms of live performance, where the audience plays an active part. In this respect, **Adil** pointed out that Punk Rock might be more analogous. For like the Blues, Punk Rock arose from a particular response (albeit perhaps better described as socioeconomic than racial per se⁴) expressing a collective sense of response towards discrimination and marginalization felt by British working class youth. And as Adil pointed out, by the time Punk Rock hit the US scene, one of its most influential outfits included the Washington DC-based African American group, the Bad Brains (pictured below)

The Bad Brains, (DC Punk Rock Band)



³ Music I was exposed to when I stayed in Tbilisi, (Republic of Georgia), from Dec. 1995-Jan. 1996.

⁴ As remarked in conversation, by Darren Hick.

According to Adil, no one in the Punk Rock scene past or present would argue that the Bad Brains played the music with any less degree of raw intensity and authenticity than, for instance, some ‘roots’ British Punk Rock band like The Clash, etc.

- **Bringsjord**

The discussion concerning the Blues in all three sections was extensive, and in some cases, quite intense. This left less time than I originally allotted for discussion on Bringsjord. Nevertheless, I opened the discussion by asking in all three sections whether or not in the twelve thought experiments he offers any difference in moral kind appears from one to another, rather than just being a difference in terms of moral degree? Keep in mind that his method of recursive *modus ponens* or hypothetical syllogism is valid. The question then depends on the soundness of this argument. Discovering any moral difference arising between two premises is one way to argue that the argument is unsound, since these incremental changes (according to Bringsjord) don’t produce a moral difference from one step to another.

Recall in the lecture (May 3, 2007) the point that **Margo T**⁵ raised, that there exists a moral difference between *description* and *reproduction*. Thus, when one arrives at scenarios 7 and beyond, a qualitatively different moral effect kicks in, it’s no longer a question of a difference of *degree*, rather a difference in *kind*. (Since at that point, in one way or another, agent A has the capacity to fully reproduce aspects of the film.)

Interestingly, however, most in the sections who voiced an opinion disagreed with this issue. For instance, **Alexander Meyer §0206** pointed out that someone endowed with ‘total recall’ should be considered as just merely describing what s/he saw to an utmost *degree* of precision and accuracy. But this limiting case doesn’t impugn one to any kind of moral accountability above and beyond the more typical cases of selective and inevitably distorted descriptions based on memory. **Alexander Meyer’s §0206** points were further substantiated **Charles Stoll §0202** who argued that the *real* change in what constitutes a moral difference actually occurs in the stage 10, 11, 12, when the hardware and software of the device *entirely* replaces the ‘wetware’ of the brain/mind of the agent. This is because, according to **Charles**, in the case of a human being recollecting (whether in the form of a perfect reproduction or by a mere description) some impression, there’s an irreducible dimension of *interpretation* that computers simply lack. This is indeed a rather crucial issue, that **Charles** was illustrating. Try as some may in the philosophy of mind and in AI to argue that the ‘brain is just like a computer’⁶ no one has been able to successfully the issue of semantics (the qualitative dimension of the content of meaning) to syntax (the formal aspects of what we thing the mind does when in processes information). **Charles** was referring to this issue when he mentioned that humans interpret in a way that we wouldn’t say that computers can and do successfully. For instance, consider the previous point addressed regarding subjective experience (the problem of qualia, mentioned above). Can one sensibly reduce a personal experience (first person) to some (third-person) algorithm describing in formal terms what’s going on in some

⁵ I didn’t catch her last name. She is in Yu Izumi’s section.

⁶ It seems a natural tendency for humans to constantly compare themselves with their latest hi-tech creations. In the late 19th century, for instance, it was thought by some (Freud, etc.) that the human psyche was “like a steam engine.” In the 13th century, when the clock was invented, monks and theologians argued that the human soul was akin to a clock.

hypothetical ‘software’ like what some people assume actually takes place in the mind? It’s a rather tendentious assumption, to say the least.

Adil Zahman §0202 substantiated **Charles’** points by stating that when a human being *remembers*, no matter how presumably accurate such memories may turn out to be, there’s still this irreducible dimension of *interpretation* (based perhaps on what we mean by consciousness) that we’d be hard-pressed to argue that computers, no matter in principle how sophisticated, could ever remotely approach doing.⁷

⁷ For more information see Hubert Dreyfus’ *What Computers (Still) Cannot Do*. (MIT Press, 1999)