

## Thoughts on the Metaphysics of American White Racism

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I'm in my sister's room in a nursing home in Oklahoma City watching over her as she's dying. Margaret has been struggling with her health for years, fighting obesity and diabetes. She's been a patient here for several months now, and then a few days ago she had multiple organ failure, which left her *in extremis*, as they say. Margaret and I were raised here with our siblings, or near here I should say, in a small town in Western Oklahoma with a population of about ten thousand. I now teach at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, Ithaca College, and am on winter break, so I flew down to be with her for what my siblings told me would be her last days. She's sixty-five and I'm ten years younger. We grew up in a small house on the edge of that town sharing two small bedrooms, we three boys in one and my two sisters in the other.

I'm sure Margaret was a surrogate mother for me, which makes this episode especially painful given that our own mother died less than six months ago. Also, without acknowledging it to myself or to her, Margaret has been an inspiration to me in my professional life. She was an intellectual, and in fact, throughout my childhood the *only* intellectual that I knew. She was a life-long student of world history, studying in PhD programs at two different universities, first at the University of Texas at Austin in the 1980s, and then more recently at Oklahoma University. She thought of herself as a failure in that regard because she never earned the degree. But I always admired her for her impressive knowledge of American and European history and for her untiring intellectual pursuits.

I want to jot down a few thoughts spawned by some observations here, thoughts about the connections between death and racism that I think are inspired by this experience, and by the story of her unhappiness. She said just yesterday in a semi-delirious state that she feels she has wasted her life. I told her that we all feel that way because life is so miraculous it's impossible to live up to. But what I'm feeling more now is the emergence of some larger cultural truths that contributed to her misery, truths that I think I wouldn't otherwise want to admit.

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Our family is white and middle-class, and my sister's liberal politics has manifested in her social interactions all her adult life. She's gone out of her way to befriend in particular black and Latina women in our racially segregated hometown, and she's done that as well here in the nursing home with the almost exclusively black nursing staff. Margaret knows all the staff members' names and the names of many of their family members. I'm told that she was very generous

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giving some of them cash gifts the Christmas before last (albeit asking my mother for the money since she doesn't have much herself).

One of the reasons I moved away from Oklahoma thirty years ago was to escape its racism. I'm uncomfortable with the racial make-up of the work force here and particularly with the hint of *noblesse oblige* in my sister's gifts. I suppose a more color-blind perspective could attribute her generosity to her empathy for the underprivileged at large, and I even wonder if my discomfort is racist as well, a projection of racial relations onto her gestures of charity. I might as well see it that way, I conclude, since I can't do anything about it here and now; racism is simply too monolithic here to resist. There's a reason I live in the Northeast, I remind myself.

Then I realize that where I work is no less racist than here; the only difference is that here in the nursing home people of color are over-represented in the service jobs, whereas where I work, among academic faculty, they're under-represented. Both the faculty and the small college town I live in are predominantly white. I don't hear racial slurs in Ithaca, for example, as I did growing up in Oklahoma, or racial jokes, or any such language denigrating people of color. Maybe that's a reflection of it being a different time now, thirty, forty years later, but I suspect it has more to do with who I spend most of my time with now, as opposed to those I grew up with in Oklahoma, for whom racism was much more of an open attitude.

But I never thought much about *why* racism wasn't a part of my consciousness, *visible* racism, that is, never considered that it was simply because there are fewer people of color. Where did I think people of color work? What did I think they were doing by virtue of not being where I work? The racism in that lapse of mine is in its blindness; in spite of my college's very open and vocal efforts to hire minority candidates—and I've served on several search committees in which that goal was forefront in our minds—and in spite of my own anti-racist teachings, I had been blind to the racism there, probably because it manifests less conspicuously than most forms of it. And surely my blindness was caused by a latent sense that I owe my own position in part to the under-representation of people of color on our faculty, which made it easy for me to toss my political reservations aside and think it's downright heartwarming to see my sister maintaining these connections in the last days of her life.

And then I have a thought, that my racial blindness is possibly connected to a half-conscious attitude I carry concerning my relationship to my job. As do many of us in this culture, I equate my job with my life to such a degree that I equate unemployment with death. Losing my job would be a kind of death to me. Margaret too may have felt this connection, which would've exacerbated her feelings of academic failure. I'm beginning to sense a monolithic psycho-historical force here, a symbiotic connection between racism and death-denial.

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I'm thinking that because hierarchy is a constitutive characteristic of racism, a racist world-view is reinforced by a predominant schema in Western civilization, the Great Chain of Being, that metaphorical structure of all matter that we've inherited from Plato and Aristotle and that was spread by the Neo-Platonists. It then became the common intellectual property of sixteenth-century Europe when that continent's worldwide economic expansion made slavery an integral component of trade, commerce, and productivity. Of course racism existed prior to Plato, but the Great Chain of Being schematized that pre-existing bigotry and created a positive feedback loop,

the racist looking back to the schema for support of his racist assumptions, which in turn reinforce the social inequities that keep the oppressed oppressed. A vicious circle.

Of course, the Great Chain of Being is merely a common example of a widespread tendency in human cultures to use hierarchies to organize themselves and to provide social scripts for behavior. Where small bands of hunter-gatherers relied on more concrete organizing forces, the larger communities that grew from the agricultural revolution of about 12 to 10,000 years ago needed these scripts to sustain cooperation networks. Historian Yuval Noah Harari provides various examples in world history of these ‘imagined hierarchies,’ which are so to speak cooked into our social structures and our religious and scientific beliefs to make them seem natural:

The ancient Chinese believed that when the goddess Nu Wa created humans from earth, she kneaded aristocrats from fine yellow soil, whereas commoners were formed from brown mud... Hindus who adhere to the caste system believe that cosmic forces have made one caste superior to another... Ask white supremacists about the racial hierarchy, and you are in for a pseudoscientific lecture concerning the biological differences between the races.<sup>1</sup>

Harari explains that the U.S. Declaration of Independence is simply another example by which a social schema is inculcated, creating a ‘hierarchy between men, who benefited from it, and women, whom it left disempowered.’ It also created a hierarchy between whites, blacks, and American Indians, he argues, who were considered humans of a lesser type and therefore did not share in the equal rights of men. Harari argues that unfortunately ‘human societies seem to require imagined hierarchies and unjust discrimination’<sup>2</sup> and then explains that in world history racism is only one factor by which cultures reify these hierarchies. In India, for example, the caste system was adopted because the conquering Indo-Aryans 3,000 years ago needed a schema to assert their dominion over the conquered indigenous population. In the U.S., race was at hand in the sixteenth-century and afterwards, to create and sustain hierarchies by way of the African slave trade. Africans weren’t exploited because they’re black, Harari explains, but because Africa is closer to the American continent than is, say, Vietnam, and because the slave trade already existed there Africans were easier to kidnap and enslave than Asians or Europeans. The belief system supporting racism was established *after* the economic conditions, so that the pious-minded Europeans could justify slavery to themselves.<sup>3</sup>

One attribute that all social hierarchies have in common, argues Harari, is that they tend to promote the idea that people lower on social scale are poisonous to others if socialized with too much or too closely. The Great Chain of Being places humans somewhere in the middle between the spirituality of God and angels—comprising the top half—and the materiality of animals, insects, minerals, and other material—comprising the bottom half. The hierarchy exists within each category as well. As described by the fifteenth-century jurist Sir John Fortescue, in the Great Chain of Being ‘there is no creature which does not differ in some respect from all other creatures

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<sup>1</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. (London: Vintage Books, 2011), pp. 150-151.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pp. 149-153.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* pp. 154-158.

and by which it is in some respect superior or inferior to all the rest.’<sup>4</sup> A racial hierarchy of human value with whites above blacks catapults whites closer to the ether of immortality.

And the Great Chain of Being, I would argue, schematizes this attribute to its maximum conclusion by symbolically associating blacks not just with the danger of illness, but with death itself. In Joel Kovel’s landmark study, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, he notes the universal tendency among racists to see their victims as dirty, even to associate them directly with dirt itself:

Just as the natural prognathism (having a projected lower jaw) of Negroes, combined with their dark skin and tropical habitat, fixed for many generations the delusion that they were half ape and half men, so has the skin color itself, that all-important yet trivial biological accident, contributed to their being fixed in the minds of whites as an *essentially* dirty and smelly people.<sup>5</sup>

This dynamic gives new meaning to the phrase ‘pulling oneself up by the bootstraps,’ that quintessential metaphor for the cherished American virtue of self-reliance: convince yourself that you’ve donned your own boots and you can feel justified in using them to kick down those below you, in this case the dark and dirty children of Ham, designated by the Catholic Church in the early Renaissance as unredeemable, unconvertible. Racists need to see themselves as superior in order to deny their own symbolic affinity with earth, which represents death, and accordingly the closer the racist thinks he is to God the more he believes he’ll live forever, denying his association with dirt, the grave, the underworld, and thus denying his death.

In short, the naturalizing schema of the Great Chain of Being has carved out for white people a route to the denial of our own deaths. Furthermore, as a white American living under the umbrella of the Protestant work ethic, I and this special position of mine have been underwritten by my employer—the provider of my primary accomplishment in life. My job is the evidence that verifies my place in the Great Chain of Being, that proves that I deserve my seat above the earth, animals, and people of color. Employment equals status and transcendence, an everlasting life, which in turn equals a well-deserved, natural, and spiritually ordained happiness. And as all positions exist by virtue of their place in the hierarchy of everything (the Great Chain of Being, to switch metaphors, is a zero sum game), my special place, my job, my employment, and my happiness, have all been granted by way of the superiority of my position over all other beings and, specifically, over people of color, within the subcategory of humans.

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There must be other social institutions that support this dynamic and make white people complacent with it. I think of the closet foundational ethos of our culture, Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium, third century B.C.E. His Roman followers brought it closer to its American manifestation, the stiff upper-lip variety, where it fused beautifully with a Protestant work ethic, for which it probably even served as an inspiration. The beliefs and social norms inherent in the Great Chain of Being, the Protestant work ethic, and in Stoicism were especially useful in the

<sup>4</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, (New York: Vintage, First Paperback Edition, 1959), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 83.

environment and culture that Margaret and I grew up in—a harsh climate, difficult soil, little money, and many mouths to feed.<sup>6</sup>

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Margaret pointed out in one of her academic papers she wrote for a class at the University of Oklahoma that our great-grandparents and grandparents, in their efforts to settle Roger Mills County along the Canadian River, out on the Western edge of Oklahoma, stumbled upon a pattern of severe droughts. ‘The region receives a modest annual rainfall,’ Margaret wrote, ‘of between twenty-two and twenty-four inches, and though the Canadian river flooded in 1904, 1914, 1941, & 1943, severe droughts were recorded for the late 1890s, the years 1910-1919, when they (our great-grandparents) were there, and in the 1930s.’ These were the conditions that fostered my great grandparents’ ideology, which Margaret, my siblings, and I inherited, an ideology of intransigent, and most assuredly misplaced, stoical grit.

The irony here in Stoicism as the closet ethos of my pioneering ancestors is that Zeno believed in a knowable, rational, and harmonious cosmos that serves as a highly stable reality upon which an ethical social system can be built, which in turn, he argued, paved the way to happiness. But how can you pursue happiness on the assumption of a stable, knowable, rational universe when unbeknownst to you the land you must cultivate to survive is about to go bone-dry for nine successive years? We’re all born with certain abilities unique to each of us, Zeno believed, and if you understand the cosmos for what it is and strive to be in accord with it, abiding by those specific endowments of yours (born a slave always a slave; born a master always a master), then you will live a happy life, peaceful in your continuing participation in the universe. Be in accord with the cosmos and you need no longer be anxious about your impending death! ‘Don’t rock the boat’ was an internalized mantra for the culture my siblings and I grew up in. Address your elders courteously, don’t cry in the face of adversity, and don’t think that you can change deep-rooted social structures. That would be hubris.

There it is, at the root of Western culture and in particular in Western Oklahoma culture, a cosmic psycho-historical ruse: make your peace with your natural status—superior if you’re white, inferior if not—and not only will you be happy in this life, but you will live forever in accord with a rational universe: the perfect recipe for status quo racism. I think of how Stoicism is an essential part of the American work ethic and of American productivity in general, even though we typically don’t learn of it until we take a philosophy course in college, that is, if we’re privileged enough to get to college. We may think America is a predominantly Christian culture, predominantly defined by the Christian right, but that’s only because the ethos we inherited from the Greeks is drowned out by the right’s rhetoric. My father grew up on a farm amidst the hardships of the depression, and although we children did not experience those austerities he obviously wanted to pass along his depression-era work ethic: we always had cattle to tend, hay

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<sup>6</sup> I think of the Protestant work ethic as a predominant ethos for everyone in Oklahoma no matter his or her religious affiliation; the Catholic/Protestant divide is relatively meaningless here. I experienced almost no divide between the two, probably because their historical and theological distinctions proved too subtle and irrelevant in the face of our culture’s preoccupation with the more pressing elements of economic and cultural survival: tough natural elements, for example, and the outside world’s general indifference to us in our small-town parochialism.

to load and stack, and fences to mend. Hard work was what we did to justify our existence. We went to mass at St. Mary's every Sunday morning, but our true religion was Stoicism.

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At one point in her delirium these past few days, Margaret asks me if she has any children, which reinforces my feeling that one of the main events in her life contributing to her unhappiness, and to her feeling that she's wasted her life, if not *the* main factor, is her abortion of a pregnancy from a relationship she had during her early graduate school days with a Pakistani man. She aborted the child, she told me years later, because she couldn't face the shame of incurring our parents' disapproval, by bringing into the world a child of mixed race. Our father had been a World War II hero, earning the Silver Star as a rifleman in the Italian campaign, and his stature made his position on ethical issues, which often went unstated but not unfelt, incontrovertible. I think Margaret was unhappy because she felt trapped by forces much larger than any of us, an entrapment created by contradictory directives: abort your mixed-race child and you're a murderer; give birth to your mixed-race child and we will ostracize you and your child both for violating the inviolable structure ordained by God, by all the angels in heaven, and by the very nature of reality.

Of course what my ancestors *should've* done—in the wake of the failure of the universe to manifest its rational, knowable conditions in drought-stricken Roger Mills County—is cast off that failed ethos. In the wake of nature's abandonment of them, my great grandparents, grandparents, and parents should've freed themselves from the shackles of Stoic grit, of which racism was only a part, yes, but a part that sustained it. But they did not reject that ethos, most likely because their settlement failures, in this case caused by drought, though relatively common in the history of white North American settlement, had already been overshadowed by the successes of white Western expansion in the nineteenth century. That is, by the early twentieth century, when my grandparents were settling Western Oklahoma, whites had already succeeded in settling the West and, as Joel Kovel teaches us, the historically significant events of a culture—in this case the settling of the West—are indications of what is the most significant psychological themes of its people. The reason my family's farming failures in Roger Mills County did not disrupt their racist sentiments is that the culture's racist psychohistory had already laid the foundation for the personality of every white person in the culture. As Kovel writes:

Racists believe in the stereotypes they create and they look for verification of those stereotypes to nourish the structure of their own personalities and to save themselves from their own deaths and their fear of nothingness.<sup>7</sup>

The Stoicism in our culture's blood provides that verification, as does the comforting hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. My ancestors could no more have shaken off their racist world-view than the families of the blacks I went to school with could have uprooted themselves from across the tracks east of town and moved next door to me in my all-white neighborhood. It simply wasn't done. It wasn't a part of our world order.

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 92.

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Three of Margaret's nurses are in her room now, and one of them asks me to step outside because they're about to bathe her. A few days from now, as she lies unconscious in the hours before she dies, they will all come into the room, kiss her face, stroke her hair, and tell her that they love her. She loved them too, partly because she understood a thing or two about history.