

Philosophy and the Black Diaspora

By Leonard Harris

Philosophy, as a discipline, relies on other disciplines to inform its substantive content. Ethical recommendations to improve individual lives or society are dependent on the behavioral, social, and human sciences to provide a viable picture of society, social psychology, and human proclivities. If, for example, we believe that there are human universals—traits that all persons have in common—any empirical evidence for this relies on the behavioral and social sciences. Without pictures provided by such sciences, philosophers have no way of knowing what it is they want to recommend as a viable improvement. This relationship between philosophy and the social sciences, however, is self-referential. How society and individuals are described is dependent on a philosophy that tells the author of the description what features are important. Competing conceptions of human agency, for example, will define caused actions and volitions differently. Thus, it may be classes, institution, individuals, coalitional groups, or mysterious forces that are considered causal sources of agency. Conceptions of the nature of human agency thus help inform the descriptions, and simultaneously, the efficacy of the descriptions can influence how we understand human agency. The same inter-dependency exists in the relationship between philosophy and the human sciences, whether in history or literature. They mutually inform our understanding.

One feature of Black Diaspora Studies involves treating “Black people” as a population, if not agency with similar experiences, influenced by or influencing similar social variables, and as a social kind with a networked history. Black Diaspora Studies provides resources for debates about the character of Black agency as well as debates regarding the character of the history of Black people. One way to think about this is to consider the difference between being “Black” and being “African.” The realities of Black life are not confined to Africa, nor are the realities of Africans limited to the realities of Black people. Black Diaspora Studies makes clear that the focus is a population understood, and self understood, as Black, and thereby necessarily racialized, but also an ethnic or culturally structured population with marital patterns and responses to common oppressions. Philosophers are constantly debating whether or not we should use a conception of contract to think about the “racial contract” between Blacks and Whites in an anti-Black world; whether an individualist volitional account of racism or one that treats racism as institutionally determined with a minor role for individual volitions as sources of racism is defensible; and whether race is an irrational and indefensible concept that should be abolished. These issues are informed by the sort of complexities and inter-relations of traditional disciplines that are integrated in Black Diaspora Studies. Consequently, philosophy and Black Diaspora Studies are indispensable to one another. As William R. Jones argued, it is only by entering some debates with an appreciation of Black situations that general issues are best appreciated. A similar argument might be made for the legitimacy and necessity of Black Diaspora Studies.

Leonard Harris, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. Formerly the Director of the African American Studies Program at Purdue, he is now the Director of the Philosophy and Literature Ph.D. Program at that same institution. Harris is the co-author (with Charles Molesworth) of Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher (2008) and the editor or co-editor of numerous critically acclaimed

anthologies. Dr. Harris was named Fulbright Scholar to Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, and Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, in 1998-1999. He enjoys travel and cycling.