
THE FORGOTTEN: IMPLICATIONS OF LYOTARD'S *HEIDEGGER AND "THE JEWS"* FOR ISSUES OF RACE IN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

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Race has been largely forgotten in Western philosophy's self-narrated identity. A stereotypical criticism of much of traditional academia is that it only studies "dead white males." Those from outside the cultural elite normally did not have a chance to participate in formal philosophical study. Others, even when they had a chance to participate in philosophy, were not incorporated into the philosophical canon in any substantial way. This truncation of the possible to the actual works in all human identity construction. The narrative structure of identity recognizes that all experience comes to us through an inherently selective interpretive framework.¹ Some experiences escape notice and so are not included in the narrative. Events which are noticed must then be organized to form coherent narratives. Some narratives are then considered unimportant; others become central. In essence, *experience must be forgotten in order for a narrative to cohere*. This forgetting, this editing, is at the heart of narrative. The dangers and opportunities which arise from such forgetting, made explicit through the work of Jean-François Lyotard, lead to an ethic of listening among those from the historically dominant culture.

Lyotard accepts narrative as both positively and negatively constitutive of human identity. Some things are not experienced and so cannot be represented. Other things are experienced but are not later represented. Only those events that are experienced and then represented enter the realm of narrative. Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the Jews"* deals with the necessity of narrative *to forget*, to leave out events that do not fit into or would upset narrative structure.² Issues such as race, power, and gender work in the truncation of experience to narrative. The types of forgetting Lyotard highlights will help us investigate how race has been forgotten in the crafting of the story of Western philosophy and reflect on ways to deal with this forgetting, including practicing an *ethic of listening*. As the nature of narrative requires, however, some of the current story of philosophy must be forgotten to make room for the retelling, and this can be very contentious within the discipline.

LYOTARD'S PROJECT

From the rubble of World War II and sequential collapses of the French government, from the violent loss of French empire in Viet Nam and Algeria to the 1968 rebellion at home, Lyotard philosophically came of age in a time of comprehensive upheaval in social, political, and ethnic power relations. Lyotard shared with other thinkers the critique of Enlightenment optimism and reason that was to be called "deconstruction." Lyotard's work may be seen as "a thoroughgoing rejection of the place of theory or critique, of the project of enlightenment, of the commodification of knowledge."³ Lyotard accepts the

Heraclitian observation of the radical singularity of all events. No matter how hard we try to capture experience in thought and understanding, something escapes notice, escapes expression.

All that happens is reduced to a story about what happened. First, narratives are received: “every narrator presents himself as having first been a narratee: not as autonomous, then, but, on the contrary, as heteronomous.” Tradition is essential at this point: without being given a narrative, we are nobody. Where tradition is concerned it is a mistake to “think identity without difference, whereas there is actually much difference: the narratives get repeated but are never identical.” Identity is seen as innovation within tradition, of being narrated by others but at the same time contributing to the narrative. Life for everyone is a continual creative challenge because “they must constantly match wits with the fate they have been given, as well as the fate they are being given” in being addressed by other narrators. For Lyotard the fluidity of narrative from one moment to the next, from one narrator to the next, holds both power and danger.⁴

At first Lyotard criticized only metanarratives, those stories that try to explain all human experience for all time. A metanarrative forces all other narratives to accept its terms of description and prescription. All metanarratives serve a legitimating function, declaring a certain concept of life and justice to be true. This idea of metanarrative, according to Lyotard, does not work without falsifying human experience—no narrative can explain *everything*. Having no grand explanatory system in place to describe everything, however, does not mean that people are “reduced to barbarity. What saves them is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.” We are left with small narratives that explain things from different perspectives, and this competing arena of narratives Lyotard saw, at the time, as more capable of promoting justice.⁵

For Lyotard justice can occur when all sides, all competing narratives, are allowed the chance to speak and be heard. Injustice occurs when one narrative overpowers the others and dominates, manipulates or ignores their input. The hope of justice is that “every one of us belongs to several minorities, and what is very important, none of them prevails. It is only then that we can say that the society is just.”⁶ The problem of justice, however, does not go away if no narrative dominates, for there are still conflicts between narratives to resolve. For Lyotard, total agreement between narratives will never be forthcoming: “We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.”⁷ Lyotard’s assumption is that there will always be conflicts between narratives that will never be resolved, an injustice that is left over after all efforts fail, and that is the “differend.”⁸ Differends are beyond arbitration because at some point narratives simply have no translations available to adjudicate differences.

All narratives, whether metanarratives or localized narratives, suffer limitations based on their structure—there is a space between narrative and experience, a space between what actually happens and what we tell about what happened. This “space of forgetting” goes largely unnoticed by those within both metanarratives and local narratives and may foster situations of injustice. For Lyotard, narrative itself is merely how reality is structured and is in essence ethically neutral. The curse of narrative is that *everything cannot be told*, even if we wanted to. We have not the time, energy, or capacity to tell all. Power relationships, however, work in this forgetting. Often those with little power are the ones being forgotten. If attention is not given to the workings of power in the building of narrative, that power all too often turns to domination. If one seeks to combat the injustice of domination, one must let more people speak so that they are not forgotten. Justice is not then guaranteed—within a deconstructionist framework justice is a choice and never an inevitability—but justice is then at least possible. When people are silenced, however, circumstances are ripe for injustice.

HEIDEGGER AND “THE JEWS”

Heidegger and “the Jews” deals with the structural tendency of narrative to bowl over conflicting points of view. In this work Lyotard deals with the necessity of a narrating memory to forget, to leave out people and events that do not fit into or would upset narrative structure. Martin Heidegger represents the totalizing narrative of Western philosophy itself, a thinking that tries to tell the whole story of life for all time. Heidegger represents ultimate *narration*. “The Jews” represent what is left out of that story, what is forgotten, and in the forgetting, trampled underfoot. Lyotard’s paradigmatic problem is how a thinker as profound as Heidegger, who highlighted the “forgetting of Being,” could be complicit in the *forgetting* of the Jews.⁹

Every narration for Lyotard is precarious, for “the ‘this is how it was’ is impossible.” The nature of human memory and the limited viewpoint of human life mean that no narrative can be total. One must “fight to remember that one forgets as soon as one believes, draws conclusions, and holds for certain. It means to fight against the precariousness of what has been established, of the reestablished past.” There are two modes of forgetting for Lyotard. The first is what we normally mean when we forget—we once knew it and now we don’t. We may remember of our own accord, we may be reminded and remember, or possibly we cannot remember at all. This type of forgetting can be entirely unintentional, and we could say that though we are responsible for it we are not “guilty” of it. My own subconscious desires and assumptions could be working in this. On the other hand, we can ignore things we know, and in an ethically negative sense this is intentional. They did not slip from consciousness, we tossed them out. In either case, something has been there and now it is not, but we may be reminded of it by others.¹⁰

A second kind of forgetting is more dangerous. Contrary to the common kind of forgetting in which we may recognize that something *was* there, a deeper forgetting is not really forgetting at all, since there was nothing represented to begin with. This for Lyotard is “a past that is not past,” and “is thus not even there as absence, as terra incognita, but it is there nevertheless.”¹¹ In this type of forgetting something simply did not register in an experience. If I ignore something, I know it is there but decide not to pay attention to it. If I unintentionally forget, someone can call it to my attention from his or her narrative perspective. If I did not or cannot represent it to begin with, however, I can never ignore it, or remember it. This kind of forgetting is irreversible.

The experience of the Jews in Germany illustrates for Lyotard both types of forgetting. First of all the Jews only fit into the Nazi story as that which had to be eliminated as enemy. Second, the SS strove to eliminate evidence of the slaughter. If there is no evidence, there is nothing to jog the memory of the forgotten. Third and most important, many Germans have no memory of the extermination of the Jews because they never knew about it; it was never inscribed in memory. Either they were kept from information or their narrative never allowed them to take in the information. This is the deep forgetting Lyotard speaks of. That there is nothing to remember, though, *is not an acquittal*. Lyotard is careful to point out that this specific effort at forgetting was a failure. The story of the Jews could not be squelched in the end, and the German narrative was faced with what it had wrought. Allowing such a tragedy by forgetting amounts to partial complicity.

Heidegger’s problem is not that his philosophy necessitated Nazis, but that it allowed Nazism in both modes of forgetting: “It is thus necessary to distinguish what is political in this thought, what, because of a lack, this thought adds to itself to make itself political, and what is missing from this thought itself, what it forgets because it permits this politics.”¹² Heidegger’s forgetting is for Lyotard an indictment of the entire Western approach to philosophy. Western philosophy from the beginning has sought to tell *the* story of existence, to narrate everything. In this attempt to narrate, something will always be forgotten. Narrative will always be guilty of leaving people and events out. The question of race has been frequently written out of the story of Western philosophy, but it has resisted the acknowledgment of this forgetting.

The question then arises, what do we do about this forgetting if we are bound to tell narratives? Narrative holds equal potential for justice and injustice, for it is merely the structure of human identity. Here lies the importance of deconstruction for Lyotard. For him, deconstruction is not destruction. Deconstruction is not a negative quest, but one step in a positive quest, for “one deconstructs...because everything is badly constructed.”¹³ Deconstruction is an attitude of suspicion toward explanatory systems. In our case here, a thought that narratizes must always remember that it has forgotten something, that there are also things it can never remember because it never

knew them. Narrative can never exhaust life—there is always more that can be told. Some of this forgetting can be remedied by letting others tell their story. Some of this forgetting, however, can never be remedied. Lyotard wants us to remember this so that in our inevitable drive to narrate we never assume that any narration is definitive. And certainly, in a postmodern philosophical landscape, we must argue for what we want—we must struggle to retell the story in a way we see as more just, all the time knowing there is no ethical grounding for this other than our collective will, all the time humble because we know that we forget something at every moment we retell the story.

Within the context of Western philosophy, race has largely been forgotten in the telling of the story. Though some philosophers have dealt with the concept of race, these ideas are seen as no more than sideshows and insignificant to their overall thought.¹⁴ In fact, in much of the history of Western philosophy, biography has often been shunted aside because of the dedication of Western philosophy to the study of ideas divorced from context. There is value in this effort, mainly in avoiding the genetic fallacy of judging an idea not for its own merit but by the source of the idea. One of the consequences, however, is that those who had a voice tended to come from the privileged classes who had access to education and leisure time in which to pursue the practice of philosophy. This means that literate, educated persons who could leave an intellectual legacy were almost always white men. Whiteness is an interesting concept in this case, for whiteness, colloquially interpreted as the “lack of color,” points out the fact that “white” folks are not forced to remember their color in the telling of their own narrative. Those “of color” are not allowed to forget. Hence the grand divide: white folks don’t see why folks of color can’t forget their color, and folks of color don’t see why white folks can’t remember theirs.

THE ETHIC OF LISTENING

In order to rediscover forgotten voices of Western philosophy, those who have until now told the story should practice an *ethic of listening*. Incessant speaking is essentially a power position which demands that one’s own narration take center stage. After the forgetting of race in Western philosophy, those within that narrative must listen to alternatives. This inclusion of alternative voices requires a wider definition of philosophy, for the traditional definition focusing on the study of ideas divorced from context allowed the forgetting of race to begin with. The narrowness of contemporary philosophy is accentuated by the ghettoization of philosophy to the university context. Since few who disagree with academic philosophy’s basic self-conception emerge intact through the university gauntlet, new voices are often found only *outside* academic philosophy—in literature, sociology, religion, music, and other places. (Even academic philosophers too often refuse to listen to each other—the historic mutual disdain between Analytic and Continental

philosophies a case in point.) Only after listening and gathering alternative voices, however, can the discipline retell itself in a more inclusive manner.

Philosophy is not an oral history, but a written history. Those people not from the dominant culture most often did not have the chance to pursue philosophy (of course gender plays an important, if ancillary, part as well.) The few who could pursue philosophy did not often have the chance to pursue publication. Without the permanent record of publication, philosophy does not exist in history. This level of the forgetting of race is analogous to Lyotard's forgetting that never allows experience to register in the narrative to begin with. Many great thinkers whose ideas were not preserved in writing are forgotten. Unfortunately, within an ethic of listening we can only here silence at this point, and lament the loss. Those who did sneak through the cracks of the philosophical story often fell victim to Lyotard's other main type of forgetting: forgetting what was indeed represented. The thinker was not taken up in the story though there may be a written record of him. Here arises the possibility of listening to these voices speak once more. Certainly W.E.B DuBois would fall into this category from recent history. The farther one recedes from the early-twentieth century, the more difficult the task becomes. Is Frederick Douglass not a philosopher merely because he was overwhelmed with specific social concerns? The only advice I would have would be to listen to suggestions from all sides without belaboring all options with immediate judgment.

Another interesting reality is that those outside the dominant culture are indeed part of the story but their racial otherness was narrated out of the story. The very origins of Western Philosophy in Greece sprouted in a soil made up of a number of interacting ethnicities and perspectives. This diverse beginning was then "downplayed in later historical accounts" as the story of philosophy developed.¹⁵ This same dynamic continued as the story of philosophy developed. Augustine of Hippo is an interesting case in point. Augustine is now a central part of the story of Western philosophy, indeed often lambasted as just the type of philosophy that we must combat in an effort to make philosophy more diverse. Augustine's African-ness, specifically his Berber heritage, has been narrated out of the story, as has the fact that he was then seen as a backwater and unsophisticated philosopher.¹⁶ However original his ideas were at the time, he has become part and parcel of the Western tradition that many critique as a dead white male adventure. Philosophers in the Middle Ages such as Averroes and Avicenna have suffered a similar fate. Their inclusion often serves only to advance, not challenge, the accepted story. This serves to point out that many of our arguments about race are not about race *per se*, but about diversity of thought. We might tend not to want to count ethnic perspectives if they agree with the dominant viewpoint.

One standard solution to the lack of balance in philosophy is the inclusion of ideas from philosophical traditions in other cultures. With the lack of records from persons of color from within the Western tradition, it is natural

to look outside the Western tradition when seeking balance. One need only glance at philosophical textbook offerings of the last several years, which run the gamut from token inclusions of Lao Tzu and Mencius to substantive and balanced inclusion across cultures and genders from various continents. These inclusions may solve the problem of getting multiple races in the discussion, but does not solve the deeper problem that these other ideas often arise from the dominant narrative within their own culture which has dominated and forgotten in its own context. Confucian thought, for example, has been used in its own context to support gender inequality and rather blind political obedience. We would be wise to heed Lyotard's warning that all narratives forget as a part of their own construction. Ideas we may include in order to increase diversity in our own context are seen as combating diversity in their own context. This caveat aside, selections from a wide variety of cultures should be encouraged in order to widen the conversation and at least knock a few foundation blocks out from under the Western philosophy metanarrative. To listen to these other cultures requires a generous ear to the possibilities they hold, and sets an important precedent of inclusion.

As valuable as the inclusion of non-Western philosophers, marginalized Western philosophers and thinkers outside philosophy are, the hardest part of the new narration of Western philosophy is not what to include, but what to abandon. Dedicated to Lyotard's idea that a narrative must forget in order to make sense, we must ask the question: what parts of philosophy can now be *righteously forgotten*? We have limited time, limited attention. After we listen we must speak, but we cannot simply add to the story without subtracting. I have already mentioned the nobility in philosophy of recognizing the genetic fallacy, of avoiding the situatedness of an idea to judge that idea on its own merits. Certainly this has not been achieved fully, and philosophy has been guilty of the negative side of the genetic fallacy—rejecting an idea on the basis of its speaker. Race has often played into this. However, philosophy has also been guilty of the positive side of the genetic fallacy—accepting an idea simply because of its speaker. Race has often played into this as well.

If we put these two ideas together, that of forgetting in order to retell the story and that of rightfully avoiding even the positive side of the genetic fallacy, then we must admit that some if not many ideas and thinkers in the history of philosophy deserve to be forgotten. Many ideas we take seriously merely because they came from thinkers the story regards as philosophical cornerstones, and therefore all of their ideas are assumed to be worthy of study. If Immanuel Kant said it, it *must* be worthy, right? Storytelling is unfortunately a zero-sum game. To win some, you must lose some. Who ends up on the chopping block? Is it time to finally forget Baruch Spinoza? Karl Marx? Plotinus? God forbid G.W.F. Hegel, Gottlob Frege? Can we not agree that Gottfried Leibniz's concept of the monad is simply boneheaded, worthy of forgetting? This is a very loaded question for philosophers, given that we all have our biases and want to determine our own philosophical agenda.

Not only do we struggle with eliminations personally, but professionally. When a colleague or department chair sees that a syllabus is missing philosopher *x*, often the reaction is a questioning of our professional acumen. This problem becomes acute in the classroom, and I am as guilty as anyone. The solution involves giving space to diverse voices in the history of philosophy and in contemporary philosophy. While it may be easy to pack a few more pages onto an anthology, packing a few more items into a semester is not nearly as feasible. When I look at my existing syllabus and ask what I should forget in order to include new voices, my answer is too often: nothing. I have already left out too much. But in order to retell the story of philosophy, I must leave out some and include others.

THERE IS NO “END OF THE STORY”

It is easy to do things as we have always done, putting off the changes. Listening, however, is an action, an action that puts others’ stories before our own. To put others before ourselves is often the most difficult thing to do—and yet this inclusion of the other, especially by one from within the dominant narrative, is the essential key that makes listening an ethical action. Recentering from the self to the other is one of the ethical cornerstones of most of the world’s ethical systems, both East and West. To retell the story of Western philosophy is to recenter the story, not merely to pull more into its orbit.

What we want to do here is significant. A philosophy which will not sweep race under the rug is a more honest philosophy which has a chance of reengaging with the multicultural problems of the day. Philosophy in the West has had its share of armchair insignificance, but it has also offered its share of solutions. If our problems today are multicultural, multi-religious, multi-political, multi-gendered, then our philosophy must become these as well. To do this, philosophy must not only retell itself, but invite all comers in the retelling. This will undoubtedly lead to chaos, to multiple retellings, but that is the nature of this new world we live in. Frankly, it has always been the nature of the world whether or not the dominant culture has told it that way.

If philosophy can mirror the chaotic order of the world of competing stories, but do so in a critical way, it might gain some of the vitality that it once had before its self-relegation to the ghetto of academia. Philosophy retold may engage with the larger society to, in the words of Cornell West, “look to new frameworks and languages to understand our multilayered crisis,” and foster leaders “who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world.”¹⁷ Issues of race, gender, culture, and economy can either work silently in the space of forgetting or come to consciousness in the retelling of the story of philosophy. Even then philosophy must remember that something will always be left out in the effort to retell the story, making the ethic of listening crucial in the coming task.

NOTES

1. The narrative structure of human experience is argued in Steven Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” in *Why Narrative*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989).
 2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews,”* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).
 3. Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), xvi.
 4. Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 32, 33, and 36.
 5. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 20 and 41.
 6. Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, 32.
 7. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 66.
 8. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
 9. Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews,”* 4. Both “heidegger” and “the jews” are largely figural in this work, thus Lyotard’s lower-case designations. Lyotard wishes to support the importance of Heidegger’s thought but at the same time, “one must admit that Heidegger was implicated in Nazism in a way that is not merely anecdotal” (52). He accepts a sort of double-nature of Heidegger, claiming that his thought neither necessarily leads to or away from Nazism.
 10. *Ibid.*, 9 and 10.
 11. *Ibid.*, 11.
 12. *Ibid.*, 68.
 13. *Ibid.*, 81.
 14. See Andre Valls, ed., *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), on how many prominent modern philosophers dealt with the concept of race. Many of these sometimes embarrassing ideas have been conveniently forgotten to not sully the received story of philosophy.
 15. Gail M. Presby, Karsten J. Struhl, and Richard E. Olsen, *The Philosophical Quest: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (McGraw Hill: Boston, 2000), xv.
 16. Kwame Okoampaahofoe, Jr., “St. Augustine the African,” *New York Amsterdam News* 90, no. 32 (1999), 26.
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17. Cornell West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 11 and 13.
