Toward a Virtuous Resistance: Radical Solidarity and the Problem of Adjudication

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In *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina sets out to analyze and counteract the inability of oppressors to acknowledge their own prejudice. This "meta-ignorance," or ignorance of one's ignorance, puts a stopper on societal discourse in that it makes it all but impossible for participants to agree on the fundamental problems that need to be addressed. Medina's analysis brings to the fore the need for a theoretical model in which agents and communities are able to surmount such meta-ignorance with virtuous dispositions that are compatible with respecting and affirming manifold voices.

Nevertheless, this sort of model is insufficient in that it calls on discursive partners to respect and internalize diverse perspectives without itself offering a way to adjudicate between them. Virtues cannot be extracted from the lived traditions that give them meaning and direction; traditions that typically disagree with one another regarding their catalog and conceptualization of the virtues. Thus, the primary desideratum is a method of adjudication that can arbitrate between competing narratives without itself producing hegemony. I submit that a MacIntyrean analysis of such tradition-constituted inquiry, combined with Medinean insights, yields the most promising proposal for overcoming meta-ignorance and producing fruitful polyphonic discourse.

I. Veils and Resistances

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois describes "a world which yields [the African-American] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 8). The "other world" is that white supremacist milieu of early 20th century United States, whose systematic oppression of the African-American produced in him[1] a fractured self with a distorted ability both to understand himself in a society that reviles him and to see himself as whites see him. Du Bois calls this ability "double consciousness." In other words, the black man is conscious not only of his own perspective but of the way in which he appears to the eyes of the oppressive other—and *both* perceptions are skewed. An epistemic crisis arises because the internalized, oppressive white gaze becomes the standard of value and dignity for black subjects who also desire to rebuff it. Du Bois hopes to release the tension of black double consciousness by striking a balance without eliminating either component: neither African only nor American only, but African-American. This new identity would then serve as a fulcrum around which the black man[2] could reassert his worth and fight for his civil rights.

There is much to commend in Du Bois' analysis; however, Du Bois fails to clarify why the white gaze, given its oppressive nature, should coexist with the black perspective at all. José Medina, by contrast, aims to provide just such an answer.

He begins by positing an additional type of ignorance typical of oppressors in addition to the interpersonal one Du Bois had identified; that is, Medina theorizes that there is yet another veiled object of perception for whites: the self. For one noetic consequence of the veil is that "the white gaze that Du Bois describes does not see the limited nature of its own perspective; it is blind to its own blindness, insensitive to its own insensitivity" (Medina 154). Medina labels this "meta-ignorance." Ignorance here is not understood as a simple lack of knowledge but as a social production that maintains power relations which are fueled by distorted knowledge and confident cluelessness. As it turns out, white supremacy would be unable to survive without an interpersonal and reflexive epistemology of ignorance.

For Medina, the white gaze is valuable in that it gives rise to a special kind of lucidity in underprivileged subjects concerning the circumstances in which they find themselves. In effect, white ignorance produces epistemic gaps, which the oppressed can perceive and exploit for their own ends. Thus, argues Medina, oppressed subjects can develop "a *resistant perception* alongside the dominant perception [they have] internalized" (emphasis in original, Medina 193), and it is this vantage point that allows them to ensconce themselves within the interstices

of interlocking social ignorances to dismantle them. In short, white ignorance produces black lucidity; it sows the seeds of its own destruction.

This does not mean that such resistance will always be effective. For instance, a former Latino coworker of mine once told a client, a man with cerebral palsy and moderate intellectual disabilities, that the reason the latter did not understand a certain policy was because he was "retarded." The client replied, angrily and with a heavy speech impediment, that my coworker should not use that word and that it hurt his feelings. My coworker, instead of listening to and empathizing with his client, responded: "Well, aren't you retarded? Why would I use another word? That's what you are!" This was an ethical crossroads for my coworker, an opportunity for his privileged, "able-bodied" gaze to be challenged.[3] Yet this interaction, and others like it, failed to pull back the ableist veil he had internalized.

A more lucid, virtuous person might have reacted differently. Medina lists the virtues of humility, intellectual curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness as characteristic of the lucid and the mirror-image vices of arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness as characteristic of the meta-ignorant (Medina 42-44). In exemplifying precisely these vices, my coworker was unable to experience the confrontation as a learning and humbling experience. Yet he exhibited the previously mentioned virtues when it came to his family, immigration, and poverty in general. This tension illustrates what I will call *the problem of constrained virtues*, a fault at the level of practical reason by which our social ignorances narrow the scope of the application of the virtues so that they cannot apply to the periphery where we have relegated the other (cf. Medina 202). Perhaps my coworker had experienced racism in his life and had developed a kind of double consciousness that eventually found equilibrium in a Latino identity.[4] But the virtues required for that process were apparently inadequate when it came to confronting his ableism *even though he had worked with clients with disabilities for decades*. What was missing was not the virtue of humility or open-mindedness *simpliciter* but a practical wisdom capable of applying such virtues to new and strange social situations. And more generally, whenever we ascribe virtue to someone, we are describing that individual as virtuous *qua* race, *qua* poverty, *qua* religion—as virtuous in a constrained social domain.[5]

That the problem of constrained virtues plagues traditional accounts can be seen in that "the standard list" of virtues[6] does little to address the various meta-ignorances that plague our society, as contemporary scholarship has sometimes acknowledged (cf. Blum 2007, Fricker, 2007, and Hursthouse 2007). I locate Medina's project in this vein when he supplants the concept of double consciousness with a "kaleidoscopic consciousness" that simultaneously acknowledges the limitations of one's perspective and the possible strengths of other, as-yet-unencountered viewpoints as valuable correctives worth seeking out for critical interaction. A *kaleidoscopically virtuous agent*, as I will call her, is one

for whom the problem of constrained virtues is no longer relevant, for she is "always open to acknowledge and engage new perspectives, and always open to strive toward a better balance among possible perspectives" (Medina 200). In effect, she desires "epistemic friction" among competing discursive participants. Still, this does not in itself bring about societal melioration; for that one needs a deep cognitive and affective understanding of the other, what Medina calls "radical solidarity." In sum: the goal of resistance is societal melioration via the radical solidarity that kaleidoscopic consciousness produces.

In what follows, I will argue that Medina's project faces a peculiar problem of adjudication in that it fails to arbitrate between competing traditions' claims to truth and action guidance. We cannot achieve societal melioration without deciding between lived traditions that provide us with the resources to practice epistemic friction virtuously. Thus, what we need is a coherent framework for a particular kind of resistance to oppression and privilege, namely, a *virtuous* resistance.

II. Emotivism and The Problem of Adjudication

One of the central claims in Alasdair MacIntyre's seminal text *After Virtue* is that "we live in a specifically emotivist culture" (MacIntyre 22). There is a deep suspicion, MacIntyre suggests, that behind the apparent rationality in our public ethical discourse lies a surreptitious emotional component. This ambivalence arises for two reasons. On the one hand, the Enlightenment tradition, from which modern liberalism stems, calls for objective reasons that are free from bias and capable of being assented to by any reasonable person; it promotes the idea of a single, unified conception of rationality. On the other hand, since Nietzsche, there has been a sense among moderns that this Enlightenment project has failed and that what remains is simply the relativity of preferences. Hence emerges a Janus-faced quandary: because of our Enlightenment inheritance, we disguise the emotional undertones of our convictions with "rational reasons"; but due to our rejection of Enlightenment conceptions of reason, it is in fact our emotions that form the substratum of our convictions. In other words, the "reasons" for our beliefs, and the "reasons" we employ to persuade (and control) others, are emotional to the core. So our moral debates have become interminable due to their assertion/counter-assertion mode; "hence perhaps the slightly shrill tone of so much moral debate" (MacIntyre 8).

An emotivist culture of this sort would be ignorant of its own ignorance on this score; it would be meta-ignorant, in Medinean terms. It would not only continue its emotivist practices, while convinced of its objectivity, but it would do so while flatly denying accusations that it is emotivist. Direct confrontation by another

large-scale tradition would be largely ineffective insofar as this emotivist culture refuses to interact with and internalize another vantage point. The parallels to the racial case are myriad, and now a MacIntyrean veil separating large-scale traditions looms.

I take it as uncontroversial that a theory which is compatible with such an emotivist culture will be unsuccessful.[7] By compatible, I mean not only logically compatible but practically so: a theory that is practically compatible with emotivism will envision a society in which its democratic participants continue to navigate interminable sociopolitical discourse with subjective preferences that arise out of disillusionment with the idea of universal rationality. I submit that Medina's thesis is just such an account.

For Medina the telos of polyphonic social discourse is "a community of shared concerns" (Medina 280) in which dialogue partners are fellow-travelers with "common access to plural ways of imagining their past, present, and future" (Medina 276. Though each may understand social maladies and their antidotes differently, there remains a shared basis upon which they can commiserate in order to improve upon their common situation: acknowledgment of and respect for the other's perspective and the experiences from which it stems (cf. 280). Medina's melioration view is decidedly pragmatist in that it requires we exercise certain virtuous capacities in unbridled dialogue because doing so is most useful for achieving societal melioration.

Yet it is precisely this same pragmatic condition that renders Medina's account problematic: it is compatible with kaleidoscopically conscious subjects conducting polyphonic discourse in an emotivist fashion. A society that followed Medina's proposal could be just as emotivist as the one MacIntyre depicts, albeit more virtuous. Herein lies the dual problem of adjudication for Medina: besides the pragmatic consideration, he supplies no mechanism to help determine which virtues to cultivate, nor are there criteria for deciding between the large-scale traditions that provide those virtues with their living context. Thus, Medina's vision of polyphonic discourse falls prey to the MacIntyrean critique of emotivist culture more broadly.

Consider first the claim that Medina's notion of kaleidoscopic consciousness is compatible with a deep commitment to emotivism. For the sake of argument imagine a kaleidoscopically virtuous emotivist named Ted. By hypothesis, Ted meets the standard list of virtues and also the additional ones expounded by Medina. Yet it just so happens that Ted is also an emotivist who believes that all moral judgments echo Stevenson's dictum: "I approve [or disapprove] of this; do so as well." So whenever Ted approves of radical openness to diversity, for example, he is expressing his feelings and calling for others to feel the same way. He may be deeply committed to that virtue, feeling passionately about it and even inspiring others to adopt it, but for emotivist Ted there is no underlying *cognitive*

or *rational* commitment to this value.

Now compare Ted to a kaleidoscopically virtuous moral objectivist; call her Diem. On the outside, Diem and Ted appear to be identical when it comes to their passion and advocacy for openness to diversity, for they are both kaleidoscopically conscious. They show up to the same rallies and protests, post similar things on social media, sign the same petitions, press for the same legislation, and even perform similar random acts of kindness in private. Still, Diem is doing something fundamentally different from Ted for, as a moral objectivist, she is cognitively committed to virtues she believes are objective features of the world. She believes she is obligated to honor those virtues even when her desires are at odds with them. But this is precisely what emotivist Ted rejects: he believes he is psychologically compelled, not morally obligated in the objectivist sense, to act on his deepest feelings for as long as he has them.

In Medina's pluralist account, Ted and Diem's actions are pragmatically equivalent insofar as they contribute equally to societal melioration. But can this really be the whole story? It cannot, if only because emotivist Ted fundamentally views all living traditions as arbitrary communal expressions of feeling or sentiment propagated by indoctrination into those same sentiments. Thus, Ted affirms *some* thesis concerning MacIntyrean large-scale traditions; however, that alone does not make him lucid with respect to the MacIntyrean veil. For one does not become lucid simply by crafting one's views with other perspectives in mind; lucidity requires the acknowledgment and empathy of radical solidarity, as Medina emphasizes. Perhaps Ted is lucid in a preliminary sense, but he remains meta-ignorant in the deeper sense of failing to accord sufficient respect towards his interlocutors and the traditions they embody, thus circumventing radical solidarity on a deeper level. Yet he remains kaleidoscopically conscious insofar as he exercises the relevant virtues, and his actions remain pragmatically equivalent to Diem's for as long as he continues to do so, whether that be temporarily or for life. Either way, his deeper meta-ignorance concerning large-scale traditions *produces* an undermining of radical solidarity that is difficult to detect.

This point is even clearer if we move away from the abstract Ted case and consider situations in which privileged individuals question minority perspectives because they suspect the latter are guided by self-interest or emotion. I take this to be symptomatic of a lack of social recognition in Honneth's sense: a denial of "a form of social esteem that allows [people] to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities." (1995, 121) I take it that the respect for other perspectives engendered by radical solidarity is a form of social recognition that appreciates sociocultural factors beyond intellectual propositions that can be judged as true or false. Emotivist Ted is, in a sense, a stand-in for anyone who attains limited sensitivity toward such factors but acts in ways that appear to fully honor them. In

the end, though all perspectives that tend toward kaleidoscopic consciousness and radical solidarity may be prima facie justified, there will inevitably be some perspectives whose internal structure provides a defeater for producing those virtues robustly. It is my contention that only those traditions without such defeaters can maintain some claim to truth and be valuable contributions to a pluralistic society.[8]

Though it would be tempting to pick out virtues à la carte, doing so would rip them out of their live context. Virtues are embedded in traditions that give them meaning and purpose, traditions that offer overlapping and oftentimes incompatible catalogs of virtues. Furthermore, even when traditions overlap in their catalog of virtues, they often conceive of them differently. So in order to determine which virtues to cultivate, and for what ends they are practiced, one must first explain why some types of tradition should be preferred over others. Diem's ability to praise or condemn dialogue partners only makes sense from within a tradition that provides her with a catalog of virtues and vices that she holds as a standard; she would not be able to practice substantive polyphonic discourse otherwise. So virtues divorced from tradition can only bring about a *thin* pluralism of epistemic friction without truth adjudication or substantive action guidance. My claim is that Medina's account is thin in this way. By contrast, MacIntyre roots virtues within large-scale traditions and proposes two markers by which successful traditions can be identified: superior coherence and explanatory power when compared to their previous iterations and rivals.[9]

Still, one reason for supposing that MacIntyre's account of adjudication needs emendation is the way in which MacIntyre elucidates the notion of a tradition: the stigma or privilege associated with one's race, gender, class, and sexual orientation within a particular social ambit is hardly, if at all, acknowledged.[10] So a third, pragmatic criterion will be necessary to address this shortcoming:

> A successful tradition will tend to reliably produce individuals and communities that approximate the virtue-consensus which results from polyphonic epistemic friction.

According to this criterion, those traditions which better instill the virtues of kaleidoscopic consciousness and radical solidarity in their adherents will have partial justification for claiming that they are more true than their rivals and predecessors. But here, the condition is not standalone as in Medina; it is constitutive of a broader evaluative standard. Contra Medina, the purpose of epistemic correction must involve evaluating claims to truth beyond pragmatic concerns because societal melioration is compatible with profound meta-ignorance.

How, then, can meta-ignorance be combatted? There is a wide spectrum of

resistance-traditions from revolutionary to pacifist versions: which traditions should individuals follow and why? The argument thus far suggests that traditions with better claims to truth will be those which overcome the triple veil while meeting both MacIntyre's criteria as well as the pragmatic one proposed. I have argued for a theory of adjudication according to which affirming the truth of a tradition means it has surmounted conceptual hurdles in a non-ad hoc manner, promises to continue to do so as it maintains dialogue with its predecessors and rivals, *and* is useful for virtuous action-guidance in the sense outlined above. Such a MacIntyrean-Medinean synthesis, I hope, can shed light on the direction we must take as we seek to overcome meta-ignorance through virtuous resistance.[11]

NOTES

1. I will use masculine pronouns for the moment to stay consistent with Du Bois' language.

2. Or, more specifically, the "talented tenth" of black leaders. Du Bois famously took a dim view of "the masses" and also of black leadership. Gooding-Williams (2009) has argued that the concept of double consciousness was itself meant to analyze and critique the perceived failure of leaders such as Booker T. Washington so that a new generation of leaders could take the helm of black political thought.

3. I place "able-bodied" in scare quotes to register my discomfort with the term. To illustrate this, consider a display I encountered at the Rosie the Riveter Museum in Richmond, CA while in the course of writing this paper. It described how some workers with disabilities were able to flourish in WWII factories: deaf people, for example, would use sign language to communicate more efficiently than other workers who could not hear each other over the noise. Given the conext, should it not strike us as odd to find that the display applied the label "able-bodied" exclusively to the latter?

4. I agree with Alcoff (2006, 244-246) that "ethnicity" does not adequately capture the Latino identity and that even though there are difficulties with grouping Latinos into a "race," it remains true that they have been racialized in the United States.

5. Fortunately, we are often virtuous in multiple, intersecting domains. It's worth mentioning that the problem of constrained virtues is, of course, exemplified by Aristotle himself, who taught at length concerning the virtues but, like most everyone else in his time, was himself sexist, racist, and ableist (cf. *Politics* 1254b13-14, 1255a1-3, and 1335b20-21 respectively; on applying a social notion of "race" to Aristotle's thought, see Ward 2002). They are all blameworthy to varying degrees because they could have done better. Surprisingly, however, this calls for empathy and not merely judgment since, as Fricker (2007) puts it, "'could do better' will be our own ethical epitaph too" (107).

6. Obviously this is an ideal list, but it is still useful as a heuristic. I will continue to use this phrase without quotes with the understanding that there is, in fact, no such list.

7. My claim may strike some as hasty, but here is not the place to discuss the merits of emotivism or skepticism in general. My reasoning here is simple: emotivism is false; therefore, theories which are compatible with emotivism are also false.

8. It may be argued that Medina's focus is on epistemic, not moral, virtue. Nevertheless, I would question such a hard and fast distinction in the spirit of Zagzebski (1996) who argues that intellectual virtues are forms of moral virtues. In any case, it seems to me that Medina's account relies heavily on "radical solidarity" which itself demonstrates moral and intellectual hybridity. But even if Medina's thesis were purely epistemic, the present arguments could be easily reformulated to address such an account. I would like to thank Cameron Wright at the University of South Florida for raising this objection at the 2018 New Mexico-Texas Philosophical Society Conference in Houston, TX.

9. Of course, these criteria are not themselves tradition-neutral since that would undermine MacIntyre's entire project. They are criteria proposed from within his own neo-Aristotelian tradition set forth for others to evaluate with the resources provided by their own tradition.

10. To his credit, MacIntyre later perceived a significant lacuna in his own work and in broader moral philosophy, namely insufficient moral reflection on disabilities and nonhuman animals. His *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) is an admirable attempt to rectify this neglect. My proposal, then, can be understood as taking up the trajectory of MacIntyre's own concerns from vulnerability and dependence to invisibility and erasure.

11. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to professors Oliver D. Crisp, Thomas M. Crisp, David A. Horner, and Timothy H. Pickavance for their penetrating critiques of earlier drafts of this paper.

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