

# On the Meaning of Evil for the Critical Race Theorist

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“He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of evil should be expressed in a very specific context when discussing critical race theory, for the critical race theorist must simultaneously address both the political and legal constructs of power, while also addressing the hegemonic abuse of power as an essentializing tool in the social construction of race and racism. The ambiguities, however, in discussing and defining the nature of evil, have translated, at least within philosophical inquiry, into a general dissatisfaction and at times, refutation of the existence of evil. The problem of evil, as it has been traditionally couched in theological discourse, while still relevant to an overall discussion of evil, fails to address the specific tensions between the functionality of evil as racializing the other, and the political and legislative manipulation of power to further objectify those oppressed by such power. The human experience is marked by diversity. Critical race theory is more than a philosophical addendum; it speaks to the heart of human diversity. Without systematic attempts to understand human diversity, our knowledge will never approximate its true potential. Thus, critical race theory must serve an integral role in philosophical inquiry if its potential is ever to be reached.

In this paper, then, I will address fourth conceptual tools, which can be used to further distill the meaning of evil for the critical race theorist. To remember these four steps one need only remember the acronym S.P.R.E., which is an acronym I’ve used to describe the function of critical race theory and the issues that it must address. It stands for struggle, power, resistance and emancipation. The critical race theorist must continually address each of these four

conceptions, and throughout the analysis, I will refer to each them and offer examples of their function within philosophy, critical race theory, and political discourse. Moreover, in describing the constructs of power, and a resistance to that power, one must also address the universality of power. If the abuse of political power can manifest as evil, then the critical race theorist must articulate the universal nature of evil. To do so, however, requires a very rigorous philosophical analysis of the manifestation of evil as transcendently real.

It is, in describing the nature of evil, my intention to bridge the gap between that which is universal and that which is secular; typically, the universal manifests as transcendental, the argument for which dates back to antiquity. The realization of truth, under this epistemological ground, manifests as transcendently real, which suggests that truth cannot reside within appearances. It is to be held as real, only insofar as it constitutes the appearance of evil within the corporeal world. Thus, our perception of evil is merely an approximation of its reality. If this approach to one's acquisition of knowledge is applied to discussing the nature of evil, then the meaningfulness of evil is only understood as an approximation. The critical race theorist, then, is charged with the epistemological responsibility of addressing the manifestation of power as oppressing various racial groups, and articulating the conditions wherein meaningful resistance can alleviate the force of oppression. To do so however, requires a clear understanding of the ontology of evil.

There are both benefits and disadvantages to this line of reasoning, i.e., the argument which states that evil solely exists as transcendently real. Though the existence of evil as transcendently real addresses the metaphysical reality of evil, that evil exists; it does not and cannot account for how we come to discover this reality. Our epistemological access to the metaphysical reality of evil is limited by its very being. Evil is seemingly disconnected from our

understanding of reality. There is great truth in the suggestion that we do not understand what evil is, but certainly, evil manifests as a construct of power. Our treatment of those with the least access to power should be such that we recognize how easily power is lost and how quickly power relations can be reversed. Thus, we should treat those lacking power in the same sense we would wish to be treated should we lose our accessibility to power.

In order to transform how evil is actualized within the corporeal world, power relations must be diversified rather than homogenized. This renewed flow of power from the bottom up, is the foundation for inclusiveness, which, at best, has the potential to redefine the social construction of race by inclusive means rather than exclusionary acts of prejudice. The critical race theorist, then, is, in part, charged with the ethical responsibility of ownership, i.e., the critical race theorist must assume accountability for the appropriation of power, as best exemplified in the Montgomery bus boycotts, as the theory becomes a conduit for power. Prior to the boycott, public transportation reinforced notions of racial oppression and the abuse of political power. After the boycotts, however, power was appropriated to the people that were otherwise oppressed, because credence was given to their economic viability. Thus, the spirit of the time had changed because of the appropriation of power. As a contemporary critical race theorist, I have accepted the ethical responsibility to address and condemn the abuse of political power and redirect power to those otherwise disenfranchised by its force.

In his discussion of a renewed sprit of the times, José Ortega y Gasset writes,

The substance or character of a new historical period is the result of internal variations—of man and his spirit; or the external variations—formal, and as it were mechanical. Amongst these last, the most important, almost without a doubt, is the displacement of power. But this brings with it a displacement of the spirit (Revolt, 125).

In a pantheistic sense, the spiritual informs the mundane and the mundane is imbued with spirituality. The spiritual is fundamentally divorced from the mundane, however, insofar as our accessibility to that which is truly spiritual is ephemeral. In climbing a mountain after days of effort and toll, to finally reach the apex of its peak, and absorb the unobstructed horizon, is to converge the spiritual with the mundane. I can have a spiritual connection with the Earth, as I recognize the biological diversity of life itself. I have overcome my struggle in actualizing my goal, by resisting the urge to quit, to fall prey to the oppressive nature of my trek. It is not simply that I am looking at a horizon, but that I am cohabitating with the horizon. I become the horizon. In overcoming the many obstacles that surely obstructed my path to the mountain's peak, I have defined my existence. This is precisely what is at stake for the critical race theorist, i.e., the critical race theorist must articulate the possibilities wherein all subjugated peoples, of all racial backgrounds, may reclaim their autonomy through their independent struggles. It is our ability to overcome our struggles, which defines the journey. Without a willingness to struggle, power dominates absolutely. With respect to the spiritual, then, it need not manifest as religious, it may be our connection with the Earth, or our connection with fellow human beings, but the critical race theorist must reject the use of power as a tool to suppress and dominate.

The precise instance, however, that one embodies this cohabitation, this oneness, with the earth, and humanity, it invariably evaporates, and one must search for the next glimpse into our shared reality. That shared reality is our connection to the planet and to each other, evidenced by the great American poet, Walt Whitman's appreciation for that connection. He writes,

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer  
where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,

Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>2</sup>

For Whitman, learning about the stars was best accomplished by his stargazing rather than listening to the learned astronomer. For the critical race theorist, theory is important, but there is no substitute for direct observation and the painful honesty of statistical data. Similarly, there is some truth to the notion that evil transcends reality, that it is much larger than anything we could ever imagine or know, and as such, requires rigorous methodological analysis. In actuality, however, as Whitman suggested, there is more to be learned in the perception of evil than in its contemplation. For example, during three months of 1994, nearly one million Tutsi were brutally massacred in the Rwanda genocide, some 11,000 murders per day, 450 murders per hour, or 7 murders every single minute for three continuous months! The truth to understanding evil is located in its function, i.e., in the act of genocide. We observe an act, and subsequently label the act as evil, which speaks to the ontology of evil more than an instance of its manifestation. As Whitman left the lecture room, he found an alternative means of interpretation by looking at the stars themselves. Similarly, evil is best understood by looking at instances we have labeled evil, i.e., events that function as representing instantiations of evil.

For example, I know this thing to be a chair, not because there exists some Form of chair in a distant and transcendental reality, divorced from any epistemological accessibility. Rather, I know this thing to be a chair, because it participates in chairness, i.e., in the being of a chair. We come to recognize this existence, using an Aristotelian framework of understanding, by the function the chair serves. If this is so, then the question one must ask is what function does evil serve? In answering this question, we gain the briefest glimpse, a peek, a peep into the nature of evil. The languid chicanery of racism must not be elevated beyond the reality of its failures. For

the critical race theorist, effectively demonstrating the role of racism in the expedition of genocide can potentially usurp the attempt to dehumanize other races and thereby thwart the possibility of genocide itself. The Holocaust, the Rwandan and Armenian genocide and so many others are inherently based in conceptions of racial superiority. Thus, the critical race theorists, is perfectly positioned to address both the nature of political power and the abuses of that power through and ideology of state endorsed racial supremacy.

It is erroneous, then, to regress to a stance of moral particularism, insofar as there exists a gulf between practice and principle, because this gulf can be mitigated by an appeal to our shared sense and understanding of the functionality of evil. As Aristotle was able to place Form in thisness, i.e., in matter, or the faculties of experience, so too was Kant able to account for synthetic sense data, which is given or thrown to our faculties of sensibility, though phenomenal representations of that which is noumenally real. The description of evil must converge between the givenness of our experience, the brutality of our innermost capacities, and the universal nature that inform our experiences. An investigation of genocide informs my understanding of evil, such that I know it by its function. In a colloquial sense, I know evil when I see it. Describing the function of evil, then, is what is at stake.

The specific instance of describing the function of evil as a construct of political power is best articulated within the discourse of genocide studies. It would be dangerous to assume that genocide always manifests as a spontaneous act of political power, that, in some sense, genocidal events occur as a consequence of rapid political developments, wherein the state brutalizes a portion of the population to suppress further uprisings. To a certain extent, there is some truth to this conception, but more often than not genocide results as a consequence of either the ideological refusal to assimilate a portion of the population or the calculated attempt to willingly

eliminate an entire population of people based solely on their differences. The function then, is to identify, disassociate and ultimately eliminate the competition.

Peter Urvin suggests that,

The distinctions between Hutu and Tutsi...were invested with notions of moral ... superiority... with the Tutsi collectively being attributed characteristics of evilness that are properly speaking dehumanizing (Urvin, 1997, p. 99).

The Hutu's dehumanization of the Tutsi served the ontological functions of evil, i.e., the being of evil, as it effectively disassociated the groups on the basis of moral and physiological superiority, for the eventual mass extermination of human life. Without acknowledging and integrating the concerns of a minority of the people, the majority can never hold claim to morality. It is how the other is perceived, which dehumanizes. Interestingly enough, Kwasi Wiredu has written in *Cultural Universals* that,

Being a human person implies having the capacity of reflective perception, abstraction, and inference. In their basic nature, these mental capacities are the same for all humans. (Universals, 23).

As Professor Wiredu has mentioned, human beings share capacities for perception, abstraction and inference. It is in our capacities that we begin to address the shared experiences among all human beings. Since racial discrimination is a construction of our socialization, and since government unfolds as a consequence of human interaction, then government too has the potential to participate in racial discrimination.

For the critical race theorist, the act of genocide requires that we reassess our notions of power, perception, and the implementation of power through policy, specifically how race may influence a politics of discrimination.

What happened in Rwanda demonstrates the impact of Enlightenment race theories, and is a direct consequence of the abuse of political power and the misrepresentation of the scientific

method. Philosophically speaking, the process of enacting genocide corresponds to Aristotle's conception of efficient cause, i.e., the actual killing of human beings, if its formal cause sought to bring about a final purification of a race by an extermination of another race. Genocide, then, is the greatest manifestation of the destructive nature of evil because the mass extermination of human life is merely a means to the true end, that being racial purification. The projection of our deficiencies and excesses, our vices and insecurities into the world only serves to facilitate the ever expanding and exponential growth of evil. The critical race theorist, then, must address the magnitude of evil as compounded by the nearly limitless power of political leaders and their abilities to dramatically shape the course of human civilization. This manifestation of power, the struggle for power within the political sphere, serves to propel the need to better understand the nature of evil to the forefront of every discipline, which is specifically why I have firmly rooted myself in an interdisciplinary analysis of evil. To overlook the tremendous dangers presented to every citizen of every nation is to undermine the totalizing force of evil. There is a politics of discrimination. Racial prejudice can and does inform our legislative process. Refusing to acknowledge this fact is precisely how genocide unfolds as a construct of the abuse of political power. Within the prejudice of race is the necessary resentment to fuel the desire of exterminating those alleged to be of "inferior races." As a critical race theorist, though I am certainly new to academia, I recognize and acknowledge the role of my oppression and my ability to oppress others. Nevertheless, this awareness comes with the responsibility to effectively make a change. Critical race theorists cannot reason from an armchair. They must engage in international and interdisciplinary efforts to stamp out the abuse of political power, wherever it may surface. The promise of international peace is a promise to embrace the Diaspora of human experiences. Peace, then, is a measurement of tolerance not an absence of

war. An absence of war is not the presence of peace. Peace can only be attained through the deliberate attempt to diversify one's surroundings. Thus, peace follows from diversity.

Immanuel Kant's almost prophetic understanding of the requisite preconditions for multinational tribunals and the importance of diplomacy and international peacekeeping efforts, were several hundred years ahead of its time, and it also speaks to the importance and necessity of interdisciplinary communication regarding the problem of evil. Kant's account of the political is derived from his *Groundwork* and his ability to recognize the confluence of human agency and our varying capacities to express freedom. It is precisely because we are free and we are social beings, that evil is such a significant problem; I would argue that it is the fundamental problem for all of humanity. This problem arises because of the conflicts in expressing one's freedom and as such, for Kant, the political must be firmly grounded in the universal prescriptions of moral law—just as the particular moral agent is so grounded. The human being is free as long as in the expression of his freedom he does not impede the freedom of others. Kant writes, "Act externally so that the free use of your choice can coexist with the freedoms of everyone in accordance with universal law" (6:231). Those who control and use political power are equally bounded to that law. The state can, and should, be held accountable for violations of its power, which is precisely what is at stake in a 21<sup>st</sup> century account of genocide and the political abuse of power.

Genocide scholarship, then, facilitates a progression of the philosophy of evil insofar as genocide theorists systematically distill various conceptions of evil from their attempts to describe competing typologies. The attempt to describe various typologies of genocide, not only yields a multiplicity of definitional variations, it also, as a consequence of the investigation, offers insight into the nature of evil by describing the systemization of death. Evil, then, culminates in the systemization of death, which should not be confused with voluntary

euthanasia, as best exemplified in Jack Kevorkian's case. Rather, evil culminates in the systematization of death, technically referring to involuntary euthanasia. Such is the case of death squad, the assassin, the lynch mob, the death camps and so on. The greatest proof for the existence of evil is in how we redefine and reconstruct instruments of death, which must not be relegated to guns and machinery. The assassin, the lynch mob, the death squad, or even a small Ugandan child soldier, are all examples of the systematization death. But overwhelmingly, the greatest ability to systematize death, either in drafting the structural blueprints for death camps or the economic expenditure in amassing weapons of mass destruction, rests wholly within scope of political power. The sheer magnitude of accessibility to capital or the ability to negotiate capital for weaponry, further entrenches the problem of evil within an analysis of political discourse.

Thus, the viability of discussing the problem of evil is a meaningful concept for both philosophers and critical race theorists, because it is precisely in discussing the problem of evil that we can speak both to its universal nature as epistemologically accessible, i.e., in discussing the function of evil, via genocide studies, and its secular manifestation, as a construct of political power.

Moreover, it has the potential to be a shared topic of interest for both Continental and Analytic philosophers. Continental philosophers can articulate the ontology of evil in terms of its universality, without differing to transcendence, if emphasis is shifted to the function of evil as manifested within an event-ontology, and Analytic philosophers can offer an epistemological grounding for our socio-cognitive awareness that evil exists, as evidenced by genocide scholarship. Furthermore, the attempt to describe evil cannot fall prey to the divisions in philosophical methods of analysis because it is a shared experience that manifests as a consequence of an abuse of political power. Understanding how that power is abused, mitigating

how political power is implemented, especially in an era of globalization, is a job for all philosophers.

With respect to the genealogy of power, then, Foucault writes,

I accept the traditional conception of power as an essential judicial mechanism....Now I believe that conception to be inadequate...What I want to show is how power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representation (Foucault, 1980, p. 183-186).

The politics of location, the physical and phenomenological experiences of particular people outside the dominant or ruling class, cannot be allowed to speak; they must be spoken for by those controlling the means of power, which is best articulated in Gayatri Spivak discussion of the Subaltern. Their voices must be appropriated rather than acknowledged. Those oppressed by power, yearn to find comfort among those oppressed by similar forces, which lends credence to Simone De Beauvoir claim that, "Women are comrades in captivity...they help one another endure their prisons, even help one another prepare for escape..." (Second-Sex, p. 546). The critical race theorist should use feminist frameworks of understanding to reconstruct power relations, as the attempt to redefine political power, transforms national interests. The interests of a nation should be to incorporate those most likely to be disenfranchised by relations of power. Thus, the character of a nation is measured in terms of its treatment of women and minorities.

It is not merely that power instructs, but that power instructs absolutely. It is not merely that power oppresses, but that power oppresses absolutely. The struggle to resist the oppressive nature of power is pacified by a shared sense of struggle and the hope for emancipation. All oppressed by power have a moral obligation to resist their oppression. Simone De Beauvoir's recognition of this shared sense of struggle signals an understanding of the nature of power and the moral agent's ability to redirect power through a heightened sense of community. The critical

race theorist, then, can benefit from feminist frameworks and their historical resistance to patriarchal power. Those drunk with absolute power, however, cannot see the plight of the other, either because their wealth affords them near total seclusion or because they are so consumed with power that the plight of the other becomes the stepping stone for their success. With reference to resisting power, Derrick Bell writes,

We must realize...that the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression even if we never overcome that oppression.”<sup>3</sup>

The magnitude of that oppression, however, can be seemingly insurmountable. Notoriously, Adolph Hitler has stated,

The greatness of a movement is exclusively guaranteed by the unrestricted development of its inner strength and by the latter’s permanent increase up to its final victory over all competitors (emphasis added), (MK, 486).<sup>4</sup>

Hitler’s fascination with attaining omnipotence is evidence enough that one may speak in terms of absolutes and universals without also invoking either religion or transcendence. For the critical race theorist, Derrick Bell’s suggestion that “the struggle for freedom is...a manifestation of our humanity that survives a resistance to oppression,” invokes a prescriptive declaration that oppressed people have the moral obligation to resist their oppression. Coupled with Simone De Beauvoir’s shared sense of camaraderie, the sting of power can be diffused through the group rather than assumed by an individual. Despite the absurdity of Hitler’s attempt, he believed that omnipotence was his to attain. His quest for power equally necessitates a struggle to resist that power. His political philosophy of Kampf, that reality is constituted by fighting, not in a theoretical sense, but actual fighting, must be contrasted by a renewed sense of egalitarianism and communalism. Thus, the critical race theorist and feminist share a similar struggle in the

appropriation of power within their respective communities. Hitler knew power was most effectively manifested through the political. He, then, sought to systematize power through subjugation and oppression, and inevitably in the systematization of death. Without Bell's mandate for resistance and Simone De Beauvoir's call for camaraderie, the political abuse of power would seek to oppress and slaughter all who oppose its instantiation. Thus, the critical race theorist is charged with the responsibility of articulating the opposition to the abuse of political power. Unfortunately, however, the illusion of racial superiority is the reality of our times.

Once the state purposefully disregards the sovereignty of surrounding states for the purpose of "cleansing the world" of a group of people, the state, in effect, must expand its borders. If political dissidents flee genocide to an adjacent state and that state chooses to harbor those dissidents, then that state becomes a threat. To kill those dissidents requires the destruction of the enemy state. Thus, war is waged. Once that state has been absorbed, all original dissidents within that former enemy state are executed. Those that flee to adjacent states are hunted and killed. The clearest example of this phenomenon was Hitler's command of Nazi Germany. In 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, initiating WWII. Months later, Nazi troops invaded both Norway and Denmark, and would later occupy France, Belgium and Yugoslavia. Often, after these invasions, concentration camps were established in the newly conquered states, which allowed for the professed "cleansing of the race," which was nothing more than the mass extermination of human life on the basis of their racial inferiority. Ian Kershaw writes,

The territorial gains brought about by the spectacular successes of the Wehrmacht in the first phase of 'Barbarossa' gave Hitler command over a greater extent of the European continent than any other ruler since Napoleon. His power and might were at their peak...His rambling, discursive outpourings, were the purest expression of unbounded power and breathtaking inhumanity.

They were the face of the future in the vast new eastern empire, as he saw it.<sup>5</sup>

Theoretically, then, there is a very real possibility that a state could grow so powerful, in approximating omnipotence, that it absorbed all other states, destroyed all other state borders, eliminated the sovereignty of all, and thereby increased its own borders, until the point at which all that existed was a one-world state. The power to annihilate any population of people, to participate in the gravest crimes against humanity, could never be mitigated by international law, because international law would cease to exist once the state reached total global dominance. Once such a one-world state came to power, there could be no possibility of moving beyond or outside of the state's domestic jurisdiction, because that jurisdiction would include the totality of the world. All former nation states would have been absorbed into the one-world state, which gives rise to a consolidation of power never before witness in the history of the world.

Thus, evil manifests through history. It is not a manifestation of history. Universal evil is the actualization of its historical approximation, which is only to say, that universal evil can never be actualized within history, because universal evil is ahistorical. Moreover, the actualization of evil within history is a sufficient condition for the end of history. The greatest approximation of its universal actualization is demonstrated in my example of the one-world genocidal state. This is not, however, to suggest as Plato did, that there exist an "out there," which transcends corporeal reality, i.e., which is other than corporeal reality. Because, arguably, all that exists is corporeal reality. Rather, as Aristotle demonstrated by locating form within matter, i.e., (matter=form=function), the actualization of evil exist as the manifestation and abuse of political power for the specific purpose of the dehumanization, oppression, and inevitably extermination of human life. It is the systematization of death for racial purification, which serves as the most heinous form of evil's manifestation.

Hitler only approximated that which he most desired, the total eradication of Jews. If left unchecked, Hitler would have approximated universal evil in the form of a one-world state. The inevitable failure of Hitler's attempt, in Kantian terms, was evident by his attempt to universalize a maxim for personal gain, which nullifies the benefits that would otherwise be preserved prior to universalization. For example, in attempting to universalize lying, the benefit of not keeping one's promise is lost in the act of universalization. Kant writes,

Then I soon became aware that I could indeed will the lie, but by no means a universal law to lie; for in accordance with such a law there would properly be no promises at all...as soon as it were made a universal law, would have destroyed itself. (GW, 4:403).

Universal evil, then, must result in the destruction of itself, which gives credence to Aristotle's claim that, "excess can be manifested in all...yet all are not found in the same person. Indeed, they could not; for evil destroys even itself, and if it is complete becomes unbearable" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> The critical race theorist must recognize that a philosophy grounded in racial superiority coupled with an ideology of Kampf, of fighting, will, in the most grievous sense, actualize the goal of racial purity, through the formation of a one-world state, only in the end to fight amongst themselves, the result being, death for all. Evil, then, cannot prevail, as it will inevitably destroy itself. I end with a quote from the great Eastern philosopher, Lao Tzu, who summarizes this concept perfectly,

Weapons are ill-omened tools,  
Not proper instruments.  
When their use cannot be avoided,  
Calm restraint is best.  
Do not think they are beautiful.  
Those who think they are beautiful  
Rejoice in killing people.  
Those who rejoice in killing people  
Cannot achieve their purpose in this world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. 1958. *Stride Toward Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper) p. 51

<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman "The Learned Astronomer"

<sup>3</sup> Derrick Bell. *Silent covenants : Brown v. Board of Ed. and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform* (New York: Oxford University Press) 2004. p. 192-193.

<sup>4</sup> Reynal and Hitchcock: NY 1940,

<sup>5</sup> Ian Kershaw, 2000. *Hitler: 1936-45 Nemesis* (W.W. Norton and Company: New York), p. 400.

<sup>6</sup> See Ross, W.D., revised by J.O. Urmson. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, The Revised Oxford Translation, vol. 2, Jonathan Barnes, ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. *Ethics*, Book IV, Part VI. 1125b35.

<sup>7</sup> Lao Tzu:*Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), (v. 31).

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