

Book Review

A Model for Re-Thinking Right and Wrong in the Academy: Zack and The Ethics and Mores of Race

*The Ethics and Mores of Race:
Equality after the History of Philosophy*
By Naomi Zack; Rowman & Littlefield, 2011

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In past decades, a lively debate about which texts to include in the “traditional canon of Western Culture” has arisen. One cause of the debates is the recognition that an uncomfortable majority of college-level courses addressing various aspects of Western civilization could be renamed “Dead White Guys” without requiring any modification of the course’s content to bring it into perfect alignment with the new, sardonic title. Historically, the “Western canon” has consisted solely of the works of White men of Western European descent. As Charles Mills argues, this rather homogenous focus is often not the result of chance or accident, but rather is the outcome of a history of racist practices and assumptions that serve to actively exclude or denigrate the perspectives and ideas of those whom the dominant culture labels “sub-persons” (Mills 1999).

These circumstances raise a critical problem for many students who do not identify as White Europeans. Why should someone whose experiences, traditions, insights, and very personhood have been expunged from moral consideration take seriously the ideas and arguments of those who did the expunging? Failure to adequately address this question can lead to an apathetic attitude toward traditionally “canonical” texts, which are seen as, at best, irrelevant, not speaking to the experiences and values of large portions of the world’s population. Moreover, as Charles Taylor powerfully argues, the failure of the academy to take seriously the experiences of diverse groups of people constitutes a real and serious harm to those peoples (Taylor 1994).

The history of philosophy and, more specifically, the history of

philosophical ethics, are no exception to these problems. However, it is not simply ironic that the rigorous study of ethics is itself a source of harmful misrecognition; in the case of academic philosophy, the problems cut more deeply. The lack of interest in the traditional texts of the history of philosophy is bolstered by the fact that academic philosophy is often characterized, quite rightly, as overly abstract and technical and as lying too many steps removed from concrete matters of life, death, and justice. Arguments about the best way to formulate abstract universal principles of human dignity seem like inane nit-picking when compared to the very real violations of human dignity that are built into the daily grind.

In *The Ethics and Mores of Race: Equality After the History of Philosophy*, Naomi Zack aims at filling in some of the lacunas in the traditional canon. She not only argues that the history of philosophical ethics is eminently useful for developing and promoting anti-racist projects, but also provides a model for how to re-think our deeply-rooted ethical traditions and scholarly practices to make racial justice a more prominent part of our understanding of classic works. By thinking about canonical texts in a new way, she works to revitalize them in the service of anti-racist practices and education, and so takes steps to correct for the effects of the long-standing effacement of the contributions of those peoples who have been overlooked by the academy.

Zack sets out on an ambitious and far-ranging project: to develop and defend a set of requirements for an ethics of race. This project is a prelude to the development of a mature ethics of race, not the construction of such a theory itself. In carrying it out, Zack adopts the role of a surveyor or cartographer, laying out the terrain, pointing to pitfalls along well-worn paths as well as good locations for productive trailblazing.

To this end, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* provides a broad overview of the history of philosophical ethics in the Western European tradition. It begins with the invention of philosophical ethics by Plato and Aristotle and proceeds chronologically to contemporary theories of universal human rights. Each chapter focuses on specific historical milestones, canonical figures, and theories that represent some of the best thinking about ethics during that era.

For each figure and theory, Zack presents the same basic argument. First, she provides a detailed explanation of the basic position. Second, she argues that certain features of the position make it compatible with oppression. That is, she argues that one can both accept the theory and engage in subordinating practices without contradiction or hypocrisy. Third, based on her analysis of the ways that the historical theory allows for oppressive practices, Zack proposes requirements for an ethics of race that closes the domination-permitting loophole. In so arguing,

Zack's overarching strategy is to understand the errors of the past so that we can avoid making them again.

As the arguments progress, Zack suggests 12 requirements that any ethics of race must meet. They fall into three categories: Egalitarian Requirements, Formal Requirements, and Requirements of Content.

Egalitarian Requirements: an ethics of race will:

- (1) focus on and assume the rights of individuals;
- (2) apply to members of all racial groups equally; and
- (3) recognize an equality of moral authority across racial groups.

Formal Requirements: an ethics of race will:

- (4) be international and include those who are not citizens of nation states;
- (5) be a discourse and set of practices that are independent of any governing or legal body;
- (6) be possible for people to put into practice; and
- (7) ensure that any unity over groups or social identities work to the advantage of everybody and not simply serve the special interests of the powerful.

Requirements of Content: an ethics of race will:

- (8) hold slavery as an absolute moral wrong;
- (9) include humanitarian goals of alleviating suffering, especially suffering that accompanies holding a disadvantaged racial status;
- (10) ensure that new governments or revisions of governments do not make worse off those who are already disadvantaged;
- (11) require that every individual, government, or social organization should always act so as to support every human being's valuation of her or his own life; and
- (12) not privilege the mores of any human community smaller than the whole of humanity.

In the course of her discussions, Zack develops and makes use of three distinct themes. First, she distinguishes between ethics and mores, that is, between abstract universal ideals and concrete traditions and practices. Second, she defends the value of adopting a cosmopolitan perspective, which seeks to develop a universal human community that maintains a respect for internal diversity. Third, she connects philosophical ethics to government and politics, adopting the Socratic principles that governments are always open to ethical assessment and that ethical discourse can result in political change. These three themes serve to connect abstract philosophical analysis about the history and theory of ethics to the concrete practices and concerns of a large and diverse human population. This goal is further served by Zack's discussions of

contemporary international statements of human rights as well as her discussions of slavery, which provide consistent concrete examples woven throughout the book.

The Ethics and Mores of Race is far-reaching and comprehensive. Zack brings into play every major theory in the history of philosophical ethics through extremely clear and concise discussions of the major works of touchstone figures of each tradition. Moreover, she maintains a critical balance within her discussions. Rather than arguing for or against any particular theory or tradition, Zack carefully weighs the strengths and weaknesses of each, and succeeds in providing an assessment of both the insights and failings of each figure and theory. Her discussions are as objective as one could hope for, critical without becoming polemical.

For all of these strengths, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* faces some significant difficulties. Zack seeks to provide a critical discussion of the entire history of philosophical ethics in fewer than two hundred pages. Each of the book's chapters could be expanded to a book-length treatise in its own right without loss of focus or deviation from the overall project. As a perhaps necessary consequence of the scope of the book, the discussion is, in general, introductory; the book's comprehensiveness makes it difficult to delve too deeply into any one topic.

Consequently, Zack often glosses over or outright ignores scholarly debates in philosophical ethics and the exegesis of the texts of the historical figures she analyzes. For example, in chapter three, Zack presents her views on the nature and existence of moral law, as well as the relationship between ethics and the law. This is a topic of fierce disagreement and significant controversy in meta-ethics and the philosophy of law. However, these debates do not get even a footnote.

This is not to say that Zack does not make use of any scholarly resources, or that her discussions lack sophistication or rigor. It is certainly not to say that Zack's positions are unreasonable interpretations of the texts and debates. However, it is to say that many of the claims that she presents as uncontroversial are in fact open to debate and interpretation. The topics and problems that Zack discusses often contain far more thorns than the book lets on.

Though there is a critical balance within each discussion, the overall structure of the chapters is, in many places, unbalanced. Zack spends many pages digging into to the details of a single figure's view, clearly explaining his position in significant detail. However, to conclude the section, she provides only a brief paragraph or two explaining the relevance of the figure's view for the philosophy of race. For example, most of the approximately 16 pages of chapter one are devoted to the basic ethical views developed in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean*

Ethics. Zack's discussion of the relevance of these texts for her overall project is confined to only two paragraphs at the very end.

This approach seems to get things backwards. Accessible accounts of the views of canonical philosophical figures and major ethical theories are easy to come by, and anyone decently well versed in the history of ethics will be familiar enough with most of the details to not need much by way of exposition. However, the relevance of the history of philosophy to an ethics of race gets short shrift. This shortcoming is especially glaring, considering that the development and defense of this relevance is, ostensibly, the main purpose of the book.

To further exacerbate this problem, Zack's expositions of the views of specific figures come across as tangents of at best questionable relevance. While perhaps interesting in their own right, these digressions leave the reader wondering what they contribute to the overall goals and conclusions of the book. At the very least, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* and its readers would greatly benefit from more telegraphing, as well as a more direct exposition of how individual sections fit together, both with each other and within the plan of the book as a whole. This problem is especially serious in the earlier chapters; by the later chapters and with a little work, a careful and charitable reader can by and large figure out what Zack is up to.

Furthermore, and somewhat ironically given the book's overall comprehensiveness, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* suffers from a kind of narrowness, insofar as it focuses on an ethics of *race*. Many, if not all, of the requirements that Zack suggests are appropriate for *any* ethics, whether it be an ethics of race, gender, class, or even a general ethics independent of its application to any social identity. Although race and racial wrongs provide the broad context in which the requirements are developed, there is nothing distinctively *racial* about them.

Contrast this narrowness with Karen Warren's ecofeminism, which, while developed in the context of discussions of the subordination of women and of natural environments, is presented as a universal feature of all systems of domination (Warren 1990). Warren argues that all forms of oppression are grounded in a particular way of thinking about difference. In short, she holds that all systems of oppression require a hierarchical binary, where one group is believed to be in some way superior to another, and an often unspoken logic that leads from (perceived) superiority to justified dominion for the superior group. Even though this schema arose out of consideration of the similarities between the subordination of women and the domination of the environment, Warren argues that it applies more broadly, and captures the patterns of thought at the base of all forms of domination—racial, sexual, class-based, ethnocentric, and

so forth. In the same vein, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider Zack's list to be requirements for an ethics of anti-oppression construed broadly, rather than an ethics of race specifically, which is still itself a highly worthwhile goal.

That said, there is a perspective from which to view Zack's work that resonates well with the spirit of the text, and from which the criticisms raised seem significantly less consequential. Consider the question with which I began: Why should any person of color care about philosophical ethics, which often purposefully abstracts away from or outright ignores matters of race, or its history, which was written by and large by white men who were not particularly concerned with race or with the experiences, perspectives, traditions, and wisdom of non-whites? *The Ethics and Mores of Race* can be understood as an answer to this question. Throughout the book, Zack is showing her readers why they should care about abstract philosophy, and the very real and beneficial roles that it can play in shaping ethical discourse and public policy. What is more, not only is Zack suggesting reasons why we should care about ethical theory, she is also modeling for students, educators, and scholars what it might look like to take race seriously in the context of the history of philosophical ethics.

Understood in this light, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* is not a work aimed at a few narrow specialists chipping away at obscure questions. It is a pedagogical exercise aimed at challenging common and often unconscious assumptions about what philosophy and ethics are and can be. As such, it will be of greatest interest to at least three populations: students, educators, and non-philosophers working on matters of race or public policy.

Zack's ability to cover large areas of the history of philosophy in a concise manner makes this book of great value to students interested in the history of ethics. Students of ethics will also benefit from the clarity of those statements; they are detailed without becoming too technical, critical without getting lost in esoteric argumentations. Not only does Zack provide a solid overview of the major periods and theories of the history of ethics, but she does so in a way that highlights the practical significance of those theories. She takes abstract philosophical theory and shows it at work addressing concrete situations, which is something that students who are relatively new to philosophy often need, and that students and educators who are more experienced with philosophy often need to be reminded of.

For these reasons and more, educators will also find the book a valuable addition to an introductory or mid-level ethics course. It critically discusses many major canonical figures, including Plato, Aristotle,

Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Bentham, Mill, and Rawls. It also covers the major normative theories such as virtue ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, divine command theory, natural law, cultural relativism, and rights-based theories. The book also includes discussions that provide good lead-ins to both applied topics and contemporary meta-ethics.

Educators working outside of philosophy departments will also find much of value in *The Ethics and Mores of Race*. The clarity and level of Zack's discussions make it accessible to those who are not specialists in philosophy. Because of its breadth and scope, the material in the book can be easily adapted to courses in fields other than philosophy, and can provide a rigorous theoretical perspective to complement material in courses that address a wide range of race and social justice related topics, including social movements, public policy, race relations, peace and justice studies, and multicultural education, to name just a few.

The Ethics and Mores of Race will also be of interest to those who are not connected with academia but who are concerned with issues of race and ethics. Biologists, sociologists, economists, policy makers, social workers, activists, and anyone else to whom racial justice matters will find Zack's requirements for an ethics of race to be a useful guide for thinking about the responsible execution of their own projects.

Given its pedagogical thrust, of what interest is this book to professional scholars? There are two ways in which scholars, as scholars, may benefit from this book. First, scholars may find the individual discussions of specific figures and eras of interest, not because the content of those discussions is remarkably new and ground-breaking, but because they are viewed from a perspective which the very figures analyzed have done much to eliminate from view, and with goals that are not commonly encountered in contemporary philosophical ethics. Rather than stretching these worn texts and authors in the professional pursuit of "saying something new" (read: publishable), the perspective and goal of an ethics of race helps to view old familiars under a new light.

More significantly, *The Ethics and Mores of Race* taken as a whole cuts with a radical edge. In the first chapter, Zack begins with a critical exposition of the ethical theories of Plato and Aristotle, and finds fault in the ancient authors' overt classism and elitist preoccupations. In the next chapter, she goes on to criticize contemporary philosophers of ethics for the same insularity. Academic philosophers receive narrow technical training aimed at membership in a small community of specialists, are too often concerned with obscure theory a few steps removed from real-world matters, and are generally loathe to engage with those in other disciplines and the general public. Zack rightly identifies these

features of academia as faults. In telling the canonical figures of the Western philosophical tradition that their imperial majesties wear no clothes, Zack reminds us that our usual, timeworn ways of thinking about ethics are not necessarily the best. This criticism can and should be applied not just to the content of the works of historical figures, but also to the contemporary practices of both academia and the public sphere, regardless of whether one is or identifies as a philosopher. In this light, a majority of her book can be understood as, in part, an attempt to correct for these contemporary problems by providing a model of how a critical examination of an academic subject, the history of philosophy, can be used to cultivate progress in the agora of our modern day world polis.

Somewhat ironically, in drawing parallel criticisms between the assumptions and preoccupations of the ancients and those of her own elite academic community, Zack places herself in the ethical tradition of the most eminent of the ancients, Socrates. This Socratic challenge for scholars to examine their own assumptions about ethics in order to better benefit the wider world beyond narrow philosophical academia is, perhaps, Zack's greatest contribution in this book.

Note

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