

Black Individualism, Black Communalism, and Conceptual Adequacy

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We are honored by Professor Bernard Boxill's and Professor Chike Jeffers's close and careful engagement. We want to elaborate two themes they highlight: in the case of Professor Jeffers, the relationship between black individualism and black communalism; in the case of Professor Boxill, the question of what makes a concept theoretically successful. Although we will say a word about the concept of freedom itself—a theme taken up by Professor Boxill—it is difficult to attempt a full response given that the volume was a collaborative affair. A complete response to the commentators' insights would require that we solicit responses from many of the contributors. Our discussion will be complete from the standpoint of the editors, but incomplete as a response to those reflections directed at specific essays. As with the publication of the volume, we hope this is the beginning of a long conversation.

THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN BLACK INDIVIDUALISM AND BLACK COMMUNALISM

Professor Jeffers's observation that *black individualism* is an emergent theme in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History* (hereafter *AAPT*) is both accurate and important. It was not our intention that black individualism emerge as a theme in *AAPT*. It happened organically. We, of course,

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expected individualism to be central to the chapter on Frederick Douglass, though Sharon Krause gives the theme new life by situating it within a theory of non-sovereign freedom (cf. Krause 2015). We suspected that individualism would have a greater role in Desmond Jaggmohan's chapter on Booker T. Washington and Corey Robin's chapter on Clarence Thomas—though both Jaggmohan and Robin surprised us by showing that deception, in Washington's case, and race pessimism and black capitalism, in Thomas's case, were more productive prisms. We were pleasantly surprised when “radical individualism” emerged as the central axis of Farah Jasmine Griffin's exhilarating chapter on Zora Neale Hurston, as well as a central object of Griffin's critique (2021, 323–24, 326, 329). We were less surprised that individualism was foundational to Tommie Shelby's chapter on Richard Wright. We knew that individualism's role in Jack Turner's interpretation of Audre Lorde would be—on first appearance—counterintuitive. We agree with Jeffers that black individualism also emerges as a theme in Carol Wayne White's chapter on Anna Julia Cooper, Daniel Moak's chapter on Thurgood Marshall, and Mark Wood's chapter on Cornel West.

Jeffers makes two observations that we hope future scholarship on African American political thought will pursue. The first is that black individualism denotes not a single ideology but a normative cluster of concern centered on individual identity, agency, equality, and dignity under white supremacy. For example, though Douglass and Lorde are both individualists, their individualisms sharply contrast. Douglass's might be called *masculinist universalist*: it defends women's equality at the level of principle and acknowledges the nonsovereign nature of freedom, but it still figures individualism through masculinist images of heroic overcoming and prioritizes black men's liberation over both black and white women's (see Foster 2011). Lorde's individualism, on the other hand, is *black feminist universalist*: the equal dignity of selves is the premise of her political theory (as it is for Douglass), but she gives priority to black women's liberation as a political compensation against centuries of intersecting oppression and as the latchkey to truly universal liberation. Lorde also opts for a relational figuration of self—a self emergent from collectivity and protected through coalition, but still possessing the capacity to say no: to negate collectivity and reject coalition on the basis of personal conscience, integrity, or desire. Douglass and Lorde vividly illustrate the meaning of Jeffers's title: there are varieties of black individualism. To speak of black individualism is to speak of a diversity of approaches to black liberation that take individual dignity and equality to be the first principle of critique. Here it is essential to note that this emphasis on the diversity of black individualisms coincides with the volume's general methodology: treating African American political thought as a diversity of individual responses to racial oppression and a diversity of individual perspectives on black group life. The study of African American political thought would benefit from

further excavation of black multiplicity on key concepts such as individualism, solidarity, freedom, and democracy. This is not to say that black difference does not exist in relationship to the white world. It is simply to say that within black difference there are many differences (see Lorde 1984/2007).

The second observation is that—in Jeffers’s eloquent words—“individualism and communalism are best seen not as mutually exclusive commitments between which we have to choose but rather as contrasting ideals we must figure out how to hold in balance” (Jeffers 2024, in this issue, 93). Jeffers is not Goldilocks: he is not blandly splitting the difference between individualism and communalism. He observes, rather, how *AAPT* exposes a complex dialectical relationship between individualism and communalism. The chapter on Lorde, for example, shows how “individuals recognizing their differences from other individuals is . . . itself generative of group difference. Applied to black communalism, this is certainly denaturalizing, as it emphasizes the way that black community is grounded in the facts of individual lives more than the way it grounds the facts of individual lives” (92). Jeffers then connects this point to “Kwame Gyekye’s argument that the Akan philosophical tradition recognizes both individuality and communality as valuable ideas”: “He quotes a proverb that tells us, ‘The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand *individually* when closely approached.’ . . . As Gyekye argues, this proverb ‘stresses the reality of the individual, which, the proverb implies, cannot be diminished or obliterated by the reality of the community’” (93). We accept Jeffers’s point that *AAPT* advances inquiry into the dialectical relationship between black individualism and black communalism and share his hope that scholars of Africana philosophy will further advance this inquiry. We would like to add one question.

Is the anti-individualist bias of much feminist and subaltern political thought partly the result of the demands of political solidarity? This is itself a question that emerges in *AAPT*. Shelby notes Wright’s observation that “where there is solidarity, there is the ever-present threat of betrayal” (2021, 421). Wright specifically refers to the anxieties of solidarity within the US Communist Party. Those anxieties made the party hostile to the questioning and nonconformity of intellectual renegades like Wright—leading Wright to “sour” on the party. As Shelby writes, “the communists did not have the wisdom to distinguish friend from foe. This ignorance and suspicion, combined with intolerance for independent thinking and fear of new ideas, was the ‘horror’ of party life, and Wright found it unbearable, in part because he was frequently its victim” (421). Does the tension that Wright observed between individual conscience and intellectual freedom, on the one hand, and the politics of solidarity, on the other, extend beyond party politics to the politics of racial and gender solidarity? This question lurks below the surface of other chapters in *AAPT*.

In her chapter on Hurston's "radical individualism," Griffin notes how Hurston saw that freedom "is precarious and can easily give way to oppression. . . . Movements against oppression have the potential to become sources of oppression once they are in position to govern. There is the suggestion that people are ultimately more committed to maintaining their positions of power and superiority than they are to equality. Freedom requires us to resist this temptation." Resisting this temptation is—in the first instance—an individual discipline: "freedom is something the individual must acquire and maintain for herself" (Griffin 2021, 320). Disciplined individual observance of the equality of persons—even one's political enemies—guards against corruption, against overinvestment in "positions of power and superiority." Hurston was suspicious of group solidarity out of concern for individual integrity and fear of collective corruption. Whether this suspicion is normatively desirable is open for debate.

In contrast to Hurston, Audre Lorde illustrates that one can endorse a politics of coalitional solidarity while still acknowledging the priority of individual conscience. Though Lorde recognized the necessity of solidarity (Turner 2021, 580–89), she warned against the perils of groupthink and of internal policing within solidaristic formations. As she said in a 1976 interview with Nina Winter, "Sometimes I look at groups of people, and this phrase 'Twilight Sleep' comes to mind. It is what happens to a system, to a movement, as soon as the people in it begin to believe in the movement more than in the individual. When you have individuals believing that you can start with the movement first and *then* the people, or that liberation belongs to one private group, then you have people moving en masse through their pain in a twilight sleep. . . . *I choose to be awake*" (quoted at 589n115). Black solidarity is indispensable in the fight against white supremacy (see Shelby 2005). Yet Hurston, Wright, and Lorde all observe that there are costs and risks to its practice. Studying the dialectical relationship between individualism and communalism in black political thought requires us to attend to the sometimes-tragic choices between the claims of conscience and the demands of solidarity.

There is something more here worth considering. It comes in that concluding moment of Professor Jeffers's reflections: "I noted earlier on that one prejudice someone like myself must overcome to appreciate how this book reframes individualism involves admiration for the ethical ideals of traditional African communalism and the assumption that modern Western individualism is ethically deficient by contrast" (Jeffers 2024, in this issue, 92). We see the point here. But perhaps the contrast between Western individualism and African communalism is itself overdrawn. Putting that to the side, a more basic observation comes through. Experiences of white supremacy placed significant pressure on African American thinking that centralized community as the site of resistance. This did not necessarily imply an aversion to individualism or the idea that individualism

is deficient, but it prompted African Americans to think about the place and distinctiveness of individuals in relation to the community and often by drawing resources from the community. Ideas about whether the individual or community is metaphysically or epistemically prior do not figure in African American political thought in the ways that they did figure in Euro-American political and moral thinking. The centrality of religion—particularly, religion understood as a social practice—also amplified the place of community. Unfortunately, religion does not receive as much attention in the volume as it deserves.

Nevertheless, whether we are reading Douglass or Hurston or West, the relational character of human life is the taken-for-granted starting point of analysis, especially in a context where nearly all of the figures agree that resistance to white supremacy will require more than individual will. Where they part ways—and Jeffers sees this—is (1) on precisely how to understand individualism in relation to the primacy of communal life and (2) on how to characterize the emphasis one places on communal life. Hurston and Thomas, for instance, are very much concerned with point 1. Figures like Delany and Garvey are most certainly focused on point 2. But the differing emphases here must not be taken for the more “traditional” individual-versus-community debates of Western political and moral philosophy (a prejudice unto itself), for this will often bring with it a bundle of commitments that the thinkers in this volume rarely seemed to hold.

WHAT MAKES A CONCEPT THEORETICALLY SUCCESSFUL?

Professor Boxill raises penetrating questions about different features and chapters of the volume. Scholars should heed them as they consider how to create better histories of African American political thought. For example, Boxill laments that we did not have chapters on Charles Mills and Lucius Outlaw. We agree that Mills and Outlaw are both important contributors to African American political thought and deserve extended analysis. Our hope has always been that *AAPT* will inspire successor volumes vying to supersede it, providing better collected histories, making this book obsolete. We hope future volume editors will experiment with Boxill’s suggestions to see whether they yield better results.

This volume is not exclusively a work of historical scholarship. It is a work of political philosophical scholarship. Judged from this perspective, the importance of figures will be highly contested. Canon-talk, even one provisionally offered such as ours, always creates a battlefield. We are wary (in our capacity as editors) of trying to decide who is most important in some final philosophical sense. For if the basic sense of philosophy is love of wisdom, the question will always be, love of wisdom

for which purposes? This permits canon-talk, but it guards against assigning too much weight, in advance, to any one thinker among the constructed list.

In constructing a volume like this, we most certainly mean for the readers to understand each of the thinkers on their own terms. Still, we hope the readers will see these figures as resources for grappling in our own time with the various problems plaguing democracy, especially the persistence of white supremacy. Some thinkers will be better than others depending on which problems we take up. We do not aim to settle the issue of which thinkers are better for which problems; we only insist that this tradition has resources for a number of the problems we find ourselves facing.

Boxill also raises the general subject of what makes concepts theoretically successful. For example, Boxill questions whether Neil Roberts's conception of "freedom as marronage"—along with its allied idea of fugitivity—adequately captures freedom's meaning:

Fugitivity becomes enjoyable only when it is reasonably successful and understood to be so. . . . When fugitivity is successful enough to be enjoyable, it also seems likely to become an opportunity for displaying and developing the many valuable virtues that successful fugitivity depends on, notably courage, alertness, and resourcefulness. . . . But it does not follow that they will never have reason to separate fugitivity from freedom. . . . [Many enslaved people in the United States] fled to Canada and other countries precisely because they hoped that they would not have to be fugitives there. . . . No escaped slaves ever said or implied that they stayed in America because their fugitivity there enhanced their freedom. (Boxill 2024, in this issue, 107–8)

This suggests that, contra Roberts, fugitivity is not essential to freedom.

We do not take sides with either Boxill or Roberts on this question. But it is still worth reflecting on the connection between fugitivity and freedom as a way of highlighting the metatheoretical question at stake: what makes a concept theoretically successful?

On the substantive question, what seems to be at issue is thinking of freedom as either (1) that which is already possessed or (2) that toward which we aspire. The second of these, which we take to preoccupy Roberts, asks us to think of freedom as an ongoing affair. In some cases, we may be talking about political instances in which one's freedom obtains, where one's freedom materializes because some set of political rights are acknowledged and respected. But to focus only here is to miss the adjectival character of freedom, the performance value of it, and its relationship to overcoming and flight. In this sense, freedom and fugitivity are intimately connected—precisely because we may need

to flee from ourselves (as in overcome some earlier picture of ourselves and our commitments), from institutions (as in revolt from them or abandon them), and from communities (as in break ties with our existing networks to form other bonds of affection) in order to experience freedom. Furthermore, that experience will likely be fleeting.

Why might it be useful to see freedom in this way? Suddenly we find ourselves thinking about what kinds of moral and epistemic virtues must obtain such that we can be agile in the way that the aspiration toward freedom requires. Something else comes along with this view. Freedom demands ongoing attentiveness to self and community. This is one reason why so many of the thinkers in the book lean so heavily on the ethical character of American life, as it displays itself in the habits of both citizens and institutions.

Notably, the volume does not suggest that this view of freedom is unique to African Americans or that it has no connection with the Euro-American tradition. We do not defend the study of black thinkers by claiming they are radically unique—for this too often involves denying their connection to those traditions on which they relied and appreciated. As we lay it out in the introduction, conceptual reconfiguration is about how the concept is altered or reshaped given the experiential condition in which it functions (cf. Hanchard 2010, 512–16). For example, freedom’s connection to resistance turns out not to be occasional, something that one undertakes only during political revolution, as Thomas Jefferson thought (a thinker Professor Boxill invokes); rather, resistance turns out to be a daily practice of the self and hopefully of society and thus intimately bound to freedom. The reconfiguration is related not to whether each tradition recognizes the importance of resistance to freedom but to how resistance as a daily practice seems to figure in freedom and enables resistance against micro and macro forces that threaten to dominate us, including forces that may emanate from our own will. The everyday practices of political and ethical disregard often shaped black people’s way of theorizing freedom. This perspective is significantly different from that of the “founding” American revolutionaries, and it illuminates another significant aspect to freedom.

Boxill implicitly assumes that the criterion of success, say, for discussing the concept of freedom is definitional adequacy: for a concept to be successful, it must include all the cases worthy of coverage and exclude all the cases unworthy of coverage. It must be neither overinclusive nor underinclusive. Boxill criticizes Roberts for proposing a concept of freedom that does not fully capture the variety of black experiences of freedom in the Americas. He assumes that Roberts seeks to provide an overarching concept of freedom that can capture as much as Locke’s or Arendt’s or Pettit’s while additionally capturing the distinctive ways enslaved people in the Americas experienced freedom as they escaped slavery. Boxill further assumes that pointing out an example of black freedom

that exceeds the framework of freedom as marronage—that is, black freed people who escaped to Canada to overcome the experience of fugitivity—exposes a weakness in Roberts’s conceptualization.

But what if Roberts’s criterion of theoretical success for “freedom as marronage” differs from Boxill’s criterion of definitional adequacy? What if Roberts’s criterion is instead *heuristic illumination*? We have already suggested what we think is being illuminated by his account. The question for Roberts may not be whether “freedom as marronage” adequately captures all cases, but whether it makes an experience legible as freedom that was illegible under traditional concepts (noninterference, nondomination, political action, etc.). If this is the case, then the disagreement between Boxill and Roberts may not be substantive, but rather metatheoretical: a disagreement about the criterion for judging a concept’s success. If the criterion for success is heuristic illumination, then we should judge “freedom as marronage” by the degree to which it (1) helps us understand the experiences of fugitives as experiences of freedom and (2) shows how those experiences are unaccounted for by traditional concepts of freedom. Pointing out that “freedom as marronage” leaves out some important examples of black freedom is insufficient to showing that the concept is unsuccessful.

Points 1 and 2 reveal something else in this metatheoretical debate regarding some of the central concepts in American and African American political thought, of which freedom is surely one. Here, Friedrich Nietzsche is correct in what he suggests in *On the Genealogy of Morality*: precisely because concepts have histories, it will be difficult, dare we say impossible, to nail down a definition in some final philosophical sense. The meaning of freedom is itself a battlefield, making the methodological attempt to secure a definition fraught. Nietzsche’s words are helpful: “There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; the *more* affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our ‘concept’ of the thing, our objectivity” (1887/2007, 87). We did not know this at the outset, but this methodological suggestion shapes the logic of the volume and is at work across its many treatments of familiar concepts. This does not prevent seeking definitions (for surely concepts must have definitions), but it resists the kind of final analysis Professor Boxill seeks. This returns us to the earlier observation: Why is a concept deployed? For which purposes?

In summary, if the criterion of success is definitional adequacy, then Boxill’s critique exposes a flaw in Roberts’s account. But if the criterion of success is heuristic illumination, then Boxill’s critique misses the target. Before the debate can be settled, judges would have to get clear on the proper criterion of success. This will require the parties to debate the prior question: what makes a concept theoretically successful? And that will lead parties into the history of

the relevant concept and ultimately into the contested terrain of what precisely we are trying to illuminate that cannot be captured by some other definition of the concept in question.

We raise this issue because we see it as increasingly pressing in the interpretation of black political thought. As interpreters deploy concepts, it will be increasingly necessary to stipulate whether they are deploying them for the purpose of definition or heuristic illumination. Getting clear on the aim of deploying controversial concepts will help audiences judge authors' accounts properly, or at the very least clarify whether an audience's resistance to an author's use of concepts is substantive or metatheoretical in nature. It would be a mistake to say that we, as the volume's editors, don't lean in a certain direction on this matter. But we leave it up to the readers to decide just what they are trying to achieve when they deploy or analyze some of the most deeply contested concepts of American and African American political thought. This volume will prove itself quite helpful in that regard.

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