

## Fanon, Frantz

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Frantz Fanon's (1925–61) contribution to ethics is, like that of Simone de Beauvoir, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre, primarily metaethical in the form of a critique of Western moral philosophy and its relation to politics (*see* BEAUVOIR, SIMONE DE; NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH; SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL). Fanon offers, however, important critical considerations in the framework of what is today called global Southern thought and its many correlates, such as Africana (that is, African diasporic) philosophy, through his explorations of radical existential humanism. This approach has many creative twists and turns that emerge out of his efforts in what is now called decolonial thought and its complement, decolonial ethics. In Fanon, one finds the effort to decolonize not only knowledge and the organization of society, but also normative life.

Frantz Omar Fanon was born on the island of Martinique in 1925. A precocious and independent young man, he was often called “Bergson,” after the famed French Jewish philosopher and Nobel Laureate whose work on vitalism and evolution influenced much of French Africana thought in the first half of the twentieth century (*see* BERGSON, HENRI). He discovered his humanism at the age of 14 as a result of his response to witnessing an autopsy. Fanon couldn't separate the person from the corpse and the associated dignity violated by its evisceration. His subsequent experiences strengthened his resolve to fight against the degradation of human beings. He fought against racial degradation inflicted by Vichy government forces stationed in Martinique, and he then left the island to fight with the French Resistance (*see* RACISM). When one of his lycée professors objected that he was volunteering to fight in a “white man's war,” Fanon responded: “each time that liberty is affected, be we whites, blacks, yellows, or kakos ... I swear to you today that no matter where it may be, each time that Freedom is threatened, I'll be there” (Fanon 1982: 6; *see* WAR). Fanon fought valiantly during the war, for which he received the Croix de Guerre. He suffered great racial humiliation from his fellow white soldiers and even the people they liberated during the war, however, which made it clear to him that ethical conviction alone was insufficient for the transformation of colonialism and racism. He went on to study forensic and psychiatric medicine at the University of Lyon and then became an apprentice of François Tosquelles, the famed Spanish humanist psychiatrist who formerly headed the medical division of the Republican Army against the fascists during the Spanish Civil War. Fanon's training led to his achieving the *chef de service*, which enabled him to head a psychiatric ward in the French-speaking world.

Fanon's advisor at Lyon had rejected his originally proposed thesis for his doctorate, “*Essai sur la désaliénation du Noir*” (“*Essay on the disalienation of the Black*”).

In response, Fanon quickly wrote a dissertation on the psychological effects of spinal degeneration and then submitted his original thesis to the philosopher and proponent of independence for Algeria, Francis Jeanson, who recommended a different title and published the work in 1952 as *Peau noire, masques blancs* ("Black Skin, White Masks"). The work is a classic in several fields ranging from African philosophy, existential and postcolonial thought to psychiatry and political thought. In 1953, Fanon accepted an appointment as head of the psychiatry department at Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria. His years there came to a radical shift at the advent of the Algerian war, which formally began in 1954 and ended in 1962. Finding himself in the untenable situation of treating both the tortured and their torturers, Fanon's response was to join the Algerian rebels, the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN), for whom he trained members in techniques of combat and resisting torture, learned from his years as a soldier. In 1956, he resigned from his post at Blida-Joinville and joined the FLN forces in Tunisia. He devoted himself to the Algerian struggle for national liberation as a physician, a writer, and then as an ambassador to Ghana until 1960, when his failing health from leukemia took its toll. He went to the Soviet Union for treatment, but was informed by physicians there that the best care was in the United States, in Bethesda, Maryland. After planning some book projects and completing his last and, arguably, most influential book, *Les Damnés de la terre* (available in English as *The Wretched of the Earth*), he went to Bethesda under the name of Ibrahim Fanon. He died there on December 6, 1961. His corpse was sent to Algeria, where he was by then a citizen, and he was buried in an FLN veterans' graveyard after a few days of ceremony and military recognition as an important revolutionary.

Fanonian ethics, if we could legitimately use such a term, is premised on the humanistic thesis of not alienating human beings from human institutions. A seemingly banal prescription, its significance is substantial when one understands that Fanon's thought was always situated by dehumanizing contexts such as colonialism, racism, and war. Never an atomistic thinker, Fanon proffered *relational* thought. He outlined his approach in his first major work, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Unlike the formalism that dominated ideas on ethics and morals from the times of Kant to the present, Fanon saw no use for formulations that separated the human being from the systems in which she or he lived. Thus, the Kantian recommendation of formal moral philosophy versus moral anthropology would not work for Fanon. There is no point in talking about ethics or morals if the agent who must adhere to their dictates stands outside their framework. In effect, echoing Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, it is the equivalent of having rules for a beautiful mansion no one inhabits (see KIERKEGAARD, SØREN; HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH). In his introduction, Fanon makes several important observations: (1) the human being is an expression of desire and hopes; (2) the human world has meaning emerging from the human capacity to produce a social world, a phenomenon he calls *socio-genesis*; (3) the social world as human-dependent is a constructed reality; (4) human beings and our correlative problems should be studied developmentally; (5) the lived reality of human experience must be taken seriously in an effort to understand

and transform it; (6) the existential reality of human phenomena is that they are premised on contingency, which means any theory in the human sciences will be incomplete at levels of application and reach; and (7) colonization is a form of domination with aspirations of completeness, which means subjugation even at epistemic and methodological levels.

An intriguing feature of Fanon's early analysis is the extent to which he took the last point about epistemic colonization seriously (*see* RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES). Such a position meant that even his analysis could be a manifestation of colonial subjugation. This metareflective consideration meant he had to make sure not to presume the legitimacy of his own position. As even his method could not be presumed, he in effect committed acts of ontological suspension, the result of which could be called Fanonian phenomenology (*see* PHENOMENOLOGY, MORAL), but is also an instance of genealogical critique where colonized concepts are idols that should be broken to avoid deification of any system of thought. Fanon, however, added existential irony to his work by positing himself as a naive participant and a metatextual critic. The irony is this: the Fanon in the text is right if the Fanon who is the critic of the text is wrong, and vice versa. He thus posed himself as the naive subject of French society and Western values attempting to make the system consistent with itself. The work thus depends on a unique relationship to failure. If his naive subject succeeds, his critical self fails; if the former fails, the latter succeeds. But there is an additional paradox: the underlying theme is a third metatextual voice – namely, the failing failure. As a work ultimately about failure, *Black Skin, White Masks* works through various efforts to absorb colonized and racialized subjects into the epistemic and axiological norms of societies premised on their exclusion. The contradiction of terms is evident.

Fanon's critical reflections here are forms of what Paget Henry (2005) calls "potentiated double consciousness." First outlined by W. E. B. Du Bois, double consciousness involves seeing oneself exclusively from the perspective of hostile others. In concrete historical terms, the ancestors of the people who became known as "Negroes," "niggers," and "blacks" had no reason to think of themselves as such. These designations came from historically imposed systems of exploitative organizations of economies, norms, and epistemic suppositions. The difficulty, however, is that these impositions take on the veneer of reality and truth, which means that many, if not most, of the degraded peoples on whom they are imposed come to believe them. They themselves become "problems." A shift emerges, however, when such people come to see the contradictions of society and realize how those problems are socially produced. Instead of seeing themselves as problems, they come to realize that the problems are what they have to face – for example, inequalities, injustices, and a slew of other double standards that stack the societal decks against them. This movement is dialectical in that each demonstrated contradiction moves knowledge forward, expanding the subjects' horizon.

*Black Skin, White Masks* thus becomes a work of potentiated double consciousness in which the system of human sciences faces important contradictions. If they were ontologically complete – that is, the way things are – then they should be able

to incorporate black and colonized peoples without adjustment. Yet Fanon shows in each chapter that this fails. An example is his analysis of Lacanian psychoanalysis. If it is correct about sex being the fundamental category of human difference, then a white woman should be able to seek her legitimacy through the authoritative words of a black male lover, as black women have done through white male lovers. Fanon shows, however, that even in the case of black female examples, what is sought is not the maleness but the whiteness of the authoritative subject, which also collapses into the normative category “masculine.” Thus, though not applying to every instance (to be consistent with his existential critique), many black women and black men sought legitimacy through the same subject: white men. This could only be explained socio-genetically: the world of colonialism and racism intervened. This relativizes the presumed terms of the system of knowledge. The movement from double consciousness to potentiated double consciousness thus becomes shifts from presumed universality to the realization of false universals. White normative systems presume they are universal in scope when they are, in fact, particularities premised on white normativity. Demonstrating their relativism reveals broader human possibility. Fanon’s (and Du Bois’s) analysis suggests, however, that this realization does not entail, say, the black as universal and the white as particular – that is, simply turning upside down while maintaining the formal structure of the system – but instead that the human world involves *universalizing* practices (see UNIVERSALIZABILITY). In Fanon’s philosophical anthropology, the human being is never complete but is instead a project in the making.

For the study of ethics, Fanon offers a critical reflection in *Black Skin, White Masks*, to which he will return in *The Wretched of the Earth* (see OPPRESSION). A fundamental formulation in the study of oppression is the Other as the site of difference. Thus, racism becomes an act of “Othering.” Fanon rejects this thesis. Racism, he argues, locates its inferiors in what he calls “the zone of nonbeing.” Ethics is at least possible in Self–Other relations. The Other, in other words, is another *self*. Thus, philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas (see LEVINAS, EMMANUEL) could speak of the Other in terms of “the ethical.” Racism, however, places designated inferior groups outside the realm of human relations (see POWER). They are thus not even others but, instead, below otherness. In effect, this places them outside ethical relations, which means a level of vulnerability in which the dominant system treats each effort of egalitarian assertion from the dominated as a violation of normative life or, as Fanon later states it, “violence” (see VIOLENCE). The struggle against racism is not, then, a fight against otherness but is, instead, an effort to be situated inside Self–Other or human relations. But as an existential critique, there is always paradox (see EXISTENTIALISM). The aim is not to be recognized in that system by those who dominate it, because, as Fanon argues, they have “killed man.” The aim, as with potentiated double consciousness, is to address the standards by which the norms of being human have been produced. The ethical goal, then, is to create a better standard, but the problem that emerges is that those outside the initial Self–Other category, as perceived violations of ethics, face establishing the conditions of ethical life *outside perceived ethics*.

Fanon's critique of morals is evident: the system of rules constituting Western moral systems is already premised on a philosophical anthropology in need of transformation. While ethics and morals may have built political life in the past, the consequence of colonialism and racism is that political action is needed for the establishment of ethical life. This reversal means that when it comes to ethics and politics, things are rarely as they appear. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon addresses this troubling question by offering a controversial portrait of violence under colonial and neocolonial conditions.

The basic problem of nonviolent critique is this: to treat the prohibition on violence as deontological – that is, absolute – leads to a failure of addressing situations in which violence is already the status quo. In such instances, what is called nonviolent intervention simply maintains – and, even worse, perpetuates – violence. Critics would object that the point is about committing violence at all, that agents of social change must be ethically better than those preserving injustice. Fanon's retort is that such arguments fail to address the core issue of violence in the first place: it is only recognized as such when it is unleashed against those whose humanity is already guaranteed. Updating his earlier argument about the zone of nonbeing, he argues that such arguments fail to see that violence is only seen as such when the agents are illegitimate. This is the condition of colonized and racialized subjects. Thus, the independence struggle in India, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa are historically situated as “nonviolent” only because of the very small number of whites killed in those conflicts. The large numbers of Indians in the first case and blacks in the latter two who were tortured and murdered don't register in the normative memory of those events.

*The Wretched of the Earth* raises an important challenge to Western ethics, which Fanon calls “the Greco-Latin pedestal.” If settlers and colonizing nations see themselves as just, then they make a claim for rightful possession of a country. If the prior, indigenous, or colonized populations regard their land as having been stolen or taken by force, then they make a legitimate claim to that country. There are, in other words, two conceptions of right or justice in direct conflict with each other. Their incompatibility means that under anticolonial circumstances justice achieved is not without justice lost. This is why Fanon argues that decolonization is always violent. The resolution, Fanon advances, is beyond the conceptions of justice at work in these models precisely because justice itself may, like the imposed colonized epistemic categories, be a colonial normative category offered as universal when it is in fact particular (see JUSTICE). Fanon thus anticipates recent movements for human dignity (see WORTH/DIGNITY) in which the ongoing objection is not that justice was not achieved, but that we need normative concepts beyond justice.

Ethicists and normative political theorists working in Africana philosophy, feminist ethics, postcolonial thought, decolonial studies, and philosophy of liberation, as well as some scholars in analytical political theory, have engaged Fanon's metaethical thought in the development of their work. Critics have seen his work as a form of anti-ethics, advocacy of irrationalism, and the glorification of violence. Alice Cherki, his former student and then colleague, however, pointed out that he detested violence.

The problem was that he despised even more those who permitted its continuation. Like Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, Fanon took seriously the notion of “unhealthy values” (see FREUD, SIGMUND). A healthy society, in the view of all three, creates options by which its members could live meaningful lives. Pride in being a good angel in hell is for them both narcissistic and a profound waste of life energy. With regard to irrationalism, Fanon also regarded reason as broader in scope than the dictates of instrumental rationality. The former included the evaluation of the latter. Put differently, reason requires not only knowing rules (morality) but also when they must be broken (ethics and politics). Fanon’s ethics, then, prescribes livable norms for a human and humane world.

**See also:** BEAUVOIR, SIMONE DE; BERGSON, HENRI; EXISTENTIALISM; FREUD, SIGMUND; HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH; JUSTICE; KIERKEGAARD, SØREN; LEVINAS, EMMANUEL; NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH; OPPRESSION; PHENOMENOLOGY, MORAL; POWER; RACISM; RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES; SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL; UNIVERSALIZABILITY; VIOLENCE; WAR; WORTH/DIGNITY

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