

Philosophy of Race (Philosophy 153)
Prof. Winther
February 18, 2017
Paper Prompt

INSTRUCTIONS

Please answer the prompt below to the best of your abilities. **Read all of it.** Please follow the writing guidelines for philosophy as listed on the syllabus. *Be sure to have a strong thesis, clear organization, and to use many quotes from the readings.* You are receiving only one prompt because it is important for you to struggle through challenging but ultimately rewarding issues.

Please try to be creative and charitable. The goal is to think clearly, broadly, and imaginatively.

You will be evaluated based on how strongly you present the arguments, regardless of whether you emotionally “believe” in them or not.

Please bring **3 copies** of your essay on **Tuesday, February 21**. The final version is due at the beginning of class on **Thursday February 23**.

PROMPT

1. BACKGROUND

For purposes of argument and challenge, and abstracting away from what your actual political and ethical views might be at this point in your life, imagine yourself as a sensitive and knowledgeable *liberal* who believes strongly in equal rights, human dignity, the importance of protecting all individuals under strong laws, and so forth. (See Section 3.)

You are sensitive to criticisms typically levied against the liberal:

- i. Cultural essentialism (e.g., Ali Rattansi p. 129).
- ii. Pernicious cultural binaries (Rattansi p. 59),
- iii. Ignoring economic inequality that worsens over time, and impacts both the ways laws get applied and how systematic oppression and discrimination occur (Rattansi pp. 128 ff, 138 ff).
- iv. Downplaying systematic discrimination against the Other, whether it be the religious, national, racialised, sexualised etc. Other
- v. Not countenancing the possibility or desirability of group rights.

Indeed, you care about which social and economic procedures could be implemented to protect or assist women, minorities, and other historically disadvantaged groups (consult Okin). Furthermore, you are horrified by the discriminatory treatment many believers in Islam, or migrants from torn nation states, receive in your home country (the USA? France?). You are not a brute, and it would be intellectually unfair to caricature you as such.

If you abhor this liberal perspective, try to just play devil’s advocate *against yourself*. (Alternatively, if you deify this position, understand the critiques of liberal thinking as laid out by, e.g., Rattansi and Bernasconi.)

Whatever your political and ethical standpoint, “understand your enemy” by becoming and defending your enemy for one class assignment. Be subtle and open.

2. YOUR TASK

In a coherent philosophical essay with a clear **thesis** and **structure**, use quotes and arguments found in class readings to clearly, fairly, and succinctly explain a reasonable liberal position. To which beliefs and practices is a liberal committed?

More importantly, explicate how a liberal position responds to some, if not all, of the five critiques listed above. What can you as a subtle, liberal thinker argue in response to critiques of “Western Eurocentrism”? Which parts of these worries as explained in, e.g., Rattansi or even in the Bernasconi reading, might you accept as legitimate, and how would you respond? Might your critic actually have an incontrovertible argument(s)? If so, where, and *why* could you, as a liberal, not respond further to your critic?

3. WHO ARE YOU, AS A LIBERAL?

Imagine that you might be a politician or member of a high-level think tank. If you need inspiration for imagining this position, have a go at this article, from which I cite some text: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/09/its-still-not-the-end-of-history-francis-fukuyama/379394/>

Most of us in the West are liberals, whether we admit it or not. We want equal rights for all, reject racial differences, cherish the freedom of worship while preserving the freedom to disagree, and seek an economic order that suits the ambitions of the individual. But there’s a growing sense that liberalism isn’t delivering at home and that it’s not as popular as we think it ought to be in the developing world.

...

This is more than just a matter of high-flown words. The concept of human dignity has two important implications, both of which were recognized by Cicero as far back as the first century B.C. but seem to have been forgotten today. The first is that *we all share the same degree of dignity*: No one has any less potential than any other, and no one’s humanity is any less pronounced than anyone else’s. The second is that *our humanity imposes upon us the same basic needs*. By virtue of our nature, we all require food, shelter, clothing, security, and a range of other basic goods necessary for sufficiency and survival. Though deceptively simple, these implications have profound meaning when we consider how individual liberty is to be translated into a social and political construct. [emphasis added]

Perhaps more usefully, please also read this:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

Philosophy is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat.

Metaphysics is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that isn't there.

Theology is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that isn't there, and shouting "I found it!"

Science is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat using a flashlight.

