


You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

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Author's response

Collins's comradely caveats

1. I do seem (with Armah) to reject Big Time Teleology, only to replace it with the story of "a society that is teleological at every point insofar as it is the result of *choice* ... suffusing every moment in the history of human society with its own *telos*." From unitary historical teleology to finite articulations of *telos* throughout history; *telos* pluralized but *telos* all the same, a pluralistic teleology, so to speak. Is my comrade exploiting the dual meanings of *telos*: *telos* as informing design and *telos* as immanent goal or purpose? "The result of choice" may conceivably be called *telos* in the first sense (I'd prefer to describe it as a constraining project ("project" in the Sartrean sense) but probably not in the second?

2. Distinguishing between communism as capitalism's consummation or patrimony and communism as "the negation of capitalism"; or conversely put, capitalism

as communism's condition but not in the sense of being the latter's determining cause, still less its beneficent progenitor, but capitalism as the determinate, actually existing socio-economic form, the damned thing, that must be dismantled as a categorical imperative of the present time. A revised counter-Hegelian version of "determinate negation"? Well taken argument.

3. That stipulation, then, changes communism from a well-nigh transhistorical demand for egalitarian justice to being a specific alternative to a specific and known entity, capitalism. By contrast I seem (with Armah) to retroactively turn *this* determinate entity into an instantiation of the eternally recurring story of injustice, and *this* specific alternative that is communism into an equally recurring demand, albeit in variegated idioms, for justice—the dénouement of an old story, or more precisely, one more act in a perennial drama. Even if communism instantiates the object of the desire for egalitarian justice, the specificity of *this* object is lost; communism then becomes a possibility for all seasons. That fuzzy indeterminateness is precisely what *The German Ideology* pillories, a point in fact briefly address in the Postscript. Again, the argument is well taken

4. I *seem* (with Armah) to be saying or implying this and that. It is evident from Collins's piece that it's not always clear in my third chapter where Armah is speaking unedited and where I am doing the talking. Clearly, there is some confusing fusion of voices here. But Ayi Kwei's Marx (and picture of Marxism in general) and mine are not clones. From "Masks and Marx" to his latest book *The Way of Companions* Armah's view of Marx and Marxism as *nothing more* than just another unexpurgated version of white racist, Eurocentric mythology and its procrustean philosophy of history is not how I see the matter. Perhaps the chapter does not make this clear enough. In retrospect, the problem is my exegetical method, which is partly indebted to political philosopher Isaiah Berlin (Oyeleye will probably not be amused by this—see below). Berlin famously conveyed the ideas of thinkers in a manner so compelling that you, the reader, are often at a loss to tell whether those views are Berlin's own or those of the thinker in question. This is especially true of views he disagreed with but whose inspiration and motivation he understood, even sympathized with (watch him describe the idea of "*positive liberty*," a doctrine of freedom he disliked and considered dangerous). Trust me, I am no Isaiah Berlin, but in a perverse sort of way, perhaps I succeeded only too well in making my voice indistinguishable from Armah's. Concurring as I do with the overarching radical ethicism of his argument for communism, I do not always flag discrete substantive points of disagreement with his opposing, quite hostile view of Marx and the Marxist tradition and his interpretation of that tradition's account of the conditions of possibility for communism. Only in one place do I hint at a demurral, viz. Armah's view regarding the Western proletariat's putative capacities and virtues as evidenced in real history: "There is no doubt much to quarrel with ..." I am persuaded by Kevin Anderson's refutation, in his magisterial *Marx at the Margins*, of the idea of the determinist, unilinearist, irredeemably Eurocentric, even racist Marx. But perhaps, comrade, a paper beckons—"Ayi Kwei's Marx and Mine," named after (here I go again!) G.A. Cohen's "Isaiah's Marx and Mine," in his *Finding Oneself in the Other*.

Kruger's conundrum

1. I think Kruger overextends my thesis regarding a common inescapable “vernacular Kantianism.” I don’t quite go so far as to say that “everybody who talks ethics is talking the same language, whether they know it or not;” only that every justification of a moral assertion and claim reposes on and ultimately resorts, to a universalizing language—what Seyla Benhabib calls “justificatory universalism.”

2. Concerning Derrida and Foucault. Perhaps not much can be done with Derrida in the metaethical matter of justification, the justification of ethical practice and values, which, on Kruger’s reading, Derrida considers *conceptually* impossible. The ethical is ethical precisely because it is ungroundable. Are you inclined to do the right thing? Just do it, Derrida would seem to be saying. That self-authorization without grounds is not inconsequential. It can no doubt sponsor private, timely, contingent acts of kindness, charity, hospitality, friendship, care. The shared and shareable work of justice requires more—“an undeconstructable concern for justice,” as Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney put it in their Preface to Derrida’s *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*.

3. Foucault’s stance is a little trickier (it’s not for nothing that Charles Taylor begins a well-known essay on him with the words “Foucault disconcerts.”); but it is a stance that the foundationalist can work on or rather with. In what way? By asking how the contingent impossibility of (justification-bound) ethical practice is knowable and nameable as *contingent*, except by reference to a quasi-transcendental norm. Such is the crypto-normativism of critical (as distinct from radical) historicism in moral epistemology, one that discloses “the specific structure of power that enforces or proposes” the ethical, and in so doing reveals the latter as a skewed universal. And how is that possible without intimations of a truer and truly shareable version? Those intimations are thinkable on the part power’s most violated subjects; they are the substance of their murmurs and screams and dreams.

Oyeleye's strictures

Oyeleye’s strictures form a cluster. Let me address the second in that cluster (the first, alas, has to do with my prose), namely, “the preeminence of Kant, Marx, Hegel, Rorty, Badiou, Nietzsche, and so many ‘Western’ or ‘Western-leaning’ ontological and epistemological frameworks” and my “immense reliance on Western orthodoxy to universalize African humanist thought”. This, in a work “that claims universalism with Africa at the center.” First, the book is a conversation as much with Africans as with leftists everywhere, but without a doubt principally leftists of “the West,” narrowly construed. It places some central arguments in contemporary African thought in dialogue with some key recurring and more recent leftist concepts and debates. My hope is that non-Africans and non-Africanists, particularly those on the left (perhaps even some curious non-leftists) will find something useful in the book, say, re-examinations of their arguments and commitments in light of ideas and debates within African intellectual history. To that end my text does indeed invoke a host of Western thinkers—by no means all figures of “Western orthodoxy”—but it does so not to “universalize African humanist thought” in the spirit of foreign aid,

but rather to illustrate analogies among idioms of ethical thought. My argument in fact is that African ethical thought has no need to be universalized; it is already self-universalizing as an internal necessity. Mine is (simply) a reminder of our old normal, a call to *sankofa* as metacritique issued to self-described opponents of universalism who see it as something alien. It is in that spirit that I reference Riffaterre in the last chapter. I tweak his yardstick for literariness by conveying the African literary work's "liberation not indeed from history but from a reductive historicism, not from local particulars but from radical particularism." I underscore "conveying" because that liberation is not something I am recommending or prescribing to our writers but something already at work in their texts. My stance is thus not one that "elevates" or thinks to elevate African literature from an impoverishing provincialism, politicism and historicism. Rather, it is one that seeks to make manifest how the African literary work already attends to the universal-in-context. But perhaps even such a nuanced context-conscious (albeit anti-anti-universalist) stance is not roots-reverencing enough, insufficiently self-referential and tautological in its justificatory vocabulary for nationalist *relativists*. I am afraid I will have to plead guilty. I will only ask: Will nationalist relativists be able to agree on any shareable norms of validity, rightness and beauty if they pushed their relativism all-the-way-down, down to intramural arguments and internal adjudication of the true, the right and the beautiful? Aha, they will undoubtedly exclaim, there goes one of the usual suspects, comprador votary of Enlightenment Reason? And this would be my retort: Why do we anti-imperialists—irony of ironies—keep awarding exclusive ownership of a human practice, a demonstrably intracultural and shared part of our discursive commons, to one fragment of humanity? So to return, in conclusion, to the heavy presence of "Western" references in a text that professes to be Africentric, I would respond that there is no doubt a legitimate question of the right balance to strike, but that, in principle, a fearless Africentrism, one freed of reactive phobias, is ready to raid all available arsenals of the human commons and shamelessly conscript them for native necessities.

Babanovski's clarifications

Babanovski is right regarding Sam Harris. I should have been far more probing regarding the substantive consequences of Harris's moral realism, the pernicious uses to which he has come to put his species of formal universalism: uses that utterly subvert its shareable substantive promise. I do in fact caution (invoking and inverting Marx's shell/kernel metaphor) that the formal shell of inescapable metaethical universalism is no guarantee of a lovely kernel, and I left it at that (*Left Universalism*, 24-25, 32). I should have added: follow the kernel, smell its innards.

In a commentary replete with positive vibrations, I particularly appreciate Babanovski's concluding sentence: "Sekyi-Otu's work impels literary critics to see African literature as addressing more than the immediately local, national or even regional concerns that gave cause to its specific content but as encompassing the whole human world of shared scarcity and abundance." That sentence provides an answer to how Oyeleye's "nationalist relativists" would read my view of what is to be done with Riffaterre's yardstick of literariness—ultimately, what is to be done with

the conceptual oppositions and binary topologies proposed by radical contextualists *and* the-view-from-nowhere-universalists alike.

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