

Spiritual Perception and the Racist Gaze

Can Contemplation Shift Racism?

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Introduction: Why is Spiritual Perception Anything to Do with Racism?

In this essay on ‘spiritual perception’ and its moral significance I shall not, initially, be attacking the problem of whether it is possible to ‘perceive’ God, directly or indirectly,¹ although in the course of my discussion that issue will indeed reappear as a (perhaps unexpected) contrapuntal theme.

Instead, the main and immediate focus of this chapter will be the problem of human ‘perception’ going *awry* (specifically in relation to so-called ‘systemic’ racism²), and on some of the purported reasons for this eventuality. This will turn out to be a surprisingly complicated matter, but it will ultimately also lead us back to the question of God. I start, then, with a couple of painful contemporary parables about American racism, in order to set the scene.³

¹ See John Greco’s Chapter 1, with whose general argument (in defence of the possibility of perceptions of God) I concur; my own contribution on this point will, however, later complicate the picture by underscoring the ‘obscure’ (or ‘dark’) nature of this perception epistemically. (On the problem of utilizing the metaphor of ‘darkness’ in the context of contemporary discussions about racism, see nn. 30, 45, and 50 below.)

² I use this term sparingly, and with some caution, in this chapter, since it raises a host of theoretic and practical issues which cannot here be analysed or assessed in any depth; and its definition, and indeed instantiation, remain matters of dispute. First, I take it that ‘systemic’ (or ‘structural’) racism involves forms of racism that have become ‘normalized’ (and thus to a large degree unconsciously embedded) in a society which discriminates against non-white people in such publicly attestable areas as criminal justice, employment, housing, banking or mortgage support, healthcare, political power, and education, etc. Secondly, if my account of racist ‘perceptual blindness’ in this essay has cogency, then it presumably has a pervasive undergirding *role* in this public scenario, although clearly it does not exhaust its remit. (For comments on the often-connected secular category of ‘implicit bias’, see nn. 14, 24, and 25 below.)

³ My approach here, so far from ‘instrumentalizing black bodies’ for other (purportedly detached) *philosophical* ends—as might be charged—is intended to highlight the ways that perceptions appear to be distorted ‘all the way down’ in a racist political system; and hence the pressure, as I shall argue later, towards utilizing in addition an undergirding *theological* narrative to explicate the profound problems that these narratives bespeak.

During the heights of the violent protests occasioned by the police shooting in August 2014 of an unarmed young black man, Michael Brown,⁴ in Ferguson, Missouri (the notoriously troubled suburb of St Louis), a local black rapper, calling himself ‘Tef Poe’, emerged not only as a vibrant and prophetic singer about the shootings but also as a canny spokesman and analyst of the underlying racial tensions.⁵ Interviewed on the early BBC *Today* programme in London some months later, he made the following arresting remark (I paraphrase from memory): ‘The American civil rights movement has failed,’ he announced with emphasis. ‘The question of civil rights does not even get to the deeper and more profound issue of racism: for that is a *problem of seeing*.’

As it happens, I have since heard this insight passingly expressed twice more—once in a journalistic⁶ and once in a black church⁷ context. Perhaps, then, it is now a coming cultural aphorism.⁸

But what exactly does it mean? The thought that the problem of racism is fundamentally a *perceptual* one (however this may be understood: we shall attempt to unpick its possible meanings below) may still seem novel and striking to some, at least in the context of certain dominant white ‘liberal’ discourses about the topic. For it seemingly cuts against—or more truly underneath—what have become, since the birth of the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, the

⁴ Details of this death remain extremely ambiguous, and witnesses contradicted each other—we have no video or webcam evidence in this case. The most important and contentious perceptual element in the various accounts relates to whether Michael Brown intended to ‘surrender’ just before he was fatally shot, raising his hands (hence the ‘Hands Up United’ movement which issued from this event), or whether he was actually about to effect an aggressive ‘charge’ against the police officer: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Michael_Brown (accessed 20 Jan 2021). A recent film by the conservative black commentator, Shelby Steele (‘What Killed Michael Brown?’, released October 2020) has recently re-ignited the debate about the causes, and the final truths, of Michael Brown’s death.

⁵ For details of Tef Poe’s (real name: Kareem Jackson’s) work as a rapper and as a co-founder of the ‘Hands Up United’ movement, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tef_Poe.

⁶ Sendhil Mullainathan, ‘Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions’, *New York Times*, 3 Jan 2015: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/upshot/the-measuring-sticks-of-racial-bias-.html>.

⁷ Pastor Cass Bailey, in a sermon to his interracial Episcopal congregation, Trinity Parish, Charlottesville, VA, September 2016.

⁸ Yet for those familiar with the classic analysis by James Baldwin (1924–1987) of what he termed the ‘whiteness problem’, this idea is not new at all. As Baldwin is often quoted: ‘Whiteness is a dangerous concept. It is not about skin color. It is not even about race. It is about the *willful blindness* used to justify white supremacy’ (see Raoul Peck, *I am Not Your Negro*, 2016 retrospective documentary on the life of Baldwin). Note that Baldwin underscores here the notion of ‘blindness’ in white racism, setting this ‘whiteness problem’ off against what was regularly called the ‘Negro problem’ in his era. The nature and root of the ‘wilfulness’ of this blindness is however what I suggest still needs further analysis, epistemologically and spiritually, as does the complexity of the problem as somehow deeper even than the effects of ‘colour’ or power; and this is what I am trying to grapple with in this chapter, both philosophically and theologically. Note that Baldwin also earlier drew attention, and paradoxically, to the seemingly *unconscious* nature of this white ‘blindness’: ‘Whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves’ (‘Letter from A Region in My Mind’, *The New Yorker*, 17 Nov 1962). For reflection on how these insights relate to what is often now called ‘implicit’ or ‘unconscious’ ‘bias’ (and on the puzzlingly generic scope of these terms), see nn. 14, 24, and 25 below.

standard philosophical and social-science analyses of constricted rights, poverty, electoral disempowerment, and educational disadvantage for black and brown people as constituting the prevailing matrices of American racism according to a familiar Enlightenment paradigm of democratic advance. (The advantage of these latter analyses, of course, is that they seem at least in principle capable of being ‘fixed’ in due time by American libertarian good will and élan, whether political, educational, or economic.)

Yet, as I heard Tef Poe that day on the radio, I do not think that his insight about ‘seeing’ was intended *merely* as a rebuke to two constituencies which relate ambiguously to this ‘liberal’ civil rights discourse and which he might well, in part, have been addressing: first, those optimistic younger liberals (sometimes white, but strangely often not) who announce that ‘race’ is now irrelevant to them, since their generation has happily become morally ‘colour-blind’;⁹ nor second, those notorious racism-deniers (usually white, often older generation, but not always so, and well charted in the statistical literature¹⁰) who deny that there are instances of ‘unconscious’ or ‘systemic’ racism at work in American society at all, since seemingly they are also unaware of (or ‘blind’ to) the pervasive social and economic inequalities related to ‘race’ which surround them all the time. The point is not often so stated: but I think we might regard these two opposed constituencies as paradoxical, and inverse, manifestations of the same ‘liberal’ tradition of civil rights (in a certain, questionable, mode): the first, the optimistic announcers of its supposed success in relation to racism; the second, the stolid deniers of its necessary application to anything other than autonomous individual social achievement and success.¹¹

It is wholly probable, of course, that Tef Poe was including both these latter parties in what he had to say. But as I heard him, his comment went deeper, and represented a more thoroughgoing and disturbing proposal: that some sort of *generic* ‘perceptual’ incapacity or distortion—perhaps some inherently visual, epistemological, and accompanying moral malaise?¹²—lies at the heart of all ‘white’ racism, *even for those who profoundly believe they are not racist*. In other words, whatever it was that happened in the moments before Michael Brown’s

⁹ A striking exemplar of this position is the tennis star Venus Williams (see *The Times* colour supplement, Saturday 17 June 2017), echoing well-cited comments of hope for a ‘colour-blind’ society by former-President Barack Obama.

¹⁰ See Bruce Bartlett, ‘The Right’s Farcical Denial of Systemic Racism’, *The New Republic*, 5 Oct 2020, for a recent review of some of these evidences.

¹¹ One striking presentation of this position from a black academic author is John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York, The Free Press, 2000). For a more recent update of such a black conservative stance, written in response to the ‘race’ crises of Summer 2020, see Glenn Lowry’s interview on race, equality and cancel culture: <https://providencemag.com/video/glenn-lowry-on-race-equality-cancel-culture/>.

¹² I am sliding quickly here, and deliberately, over the relation between the ‘perceptual’, the (more broadly) ‘epistemological’, and the ‘moral’—all distinct categories philosophically. See the last section of this chapter for the untangling (and re-connecting) of these categories.

death involved, for Tef Poe, 'not seeing' in some morally culpable sense. And note that we cannot rule out the inverse possibility, too (even though Tef Poe made no explicit mention of it): that there may also be perceptual distortion in the corresponding (or rather, reactive) response of self-alienation, distrust, resentment, and anger from the side of the racially disempowered—again, *even for those who profoundly believe they are not racist*; and moreover that this 'problem of seeing' has a strangely evanescent cultural quality of its own, perhaps—as Shulamith Firestone famously put it in another context of feminist critique—'so deep as to be invisible'.¹³

In other words, if I heard Tef Poe aright, contemporary American racism may potentially affect and afflict all of us 'perceptually' in one way or another, and *all the way down*. This is not of course to 'bracket' the all-important differentials of *power* in this complex perceptual and epistemological scenario—far from it; and I shall come back to this matter later with some force. But it is to draw attention to a prevailing mood of perceptual distortion with which *all* may be said to struggle in the context of established social practices of racialized difference. If so, the judgement on Michael Brown's death cannot simply be seen as a visual and testimonial disagreement between different witnesses about whether Brown lifted his hands to surrender or to indicate an aggressive intent against a police officer; rather, it goes deeper into the arena of what this same 'liberal' tradition now (rather inchoately and desperately) calls 'unconscious bias', a category to which, however, it finds it notoriously hard to give precise content in contexts of legal dispute or conflicting testimony.¹⁴

So it seems that even now this 'problem of seeing' is still not clear enough. What exact form does this 'perceptual' incapacity of which we have spoken take,

¹³ I am reapplying her justly famous phrase on 'sex class': *The Dialectic of Sex* (orig. 1970; Boston, Women's Press, 1979), 1.

¹⁴ I am deliberately avoiding appealing to this (highly *au courant*) category in this particular essay, for at least two reasons. First, *generic* 'unconscious'—'implicit'—'bias' of a racist sort is in any case very hard to pin down empirically, but is certainly wider in remit than the specifically *perceptual* element which I am focusing on here. Secondly, recent studies of 'implicit bias' investigations, most famously those emanating from the Harvard Psychology Department (the 'Implicit Association Test'), indicate that their empirical results are very hard to correlate with actual 'racist' behaviours: for an important survey article on these theoretical problems, citing relevant recent scholarly publications, see Jesse Singal, 'Psychology's Favorite Tool for Measuring Racism Isn't Up to the Job', <https://www.thecut.com/2017/01/psychologys-racism-measuring-tool-isnt-up-to-the-job.html>. We must underscore here also the paradoxical nature of the relation of the modern 'rights' tradition (centrally concerned with autonomy, freedom, conscious intentionality, 'Enlightenment'), to the equally modern birth of psychoanalysis, and its attempted probing of the realm of the *unconscious*. Note that the problems of contemporary American racism sit notably astride these divergent, if not contradictory, directions in modern thought, leading to very different theoretical understandings of 'race' and its problems. Of late, the liberal 'rights' tradition has come into outright conflict with 'identity politics' on precisely these issues: for a perceptive journalistic reflection on this *dénouement*, see *The Economist*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/07/09/enlightenment-liberalism-is-losing-ground-in-the-debate-about-race>.

we must ask again, and how are we to explain it philosophically—or perhaps even theologically?

What is it that Cannot be ‘Seen’ in Conditions of Racism?

Let me take another painful example of a black man’s recent death to unpack this difficult point of Tef Poe’s a bit further.¹⁵ It, too, has already become an iconic symbol of fatal police violence against a black man in the United States of America; and note that, in this instance, the relevant policeman responsible for a shooting death is not white, but Latino. Note too that in this second case it is not conflicting (ex post facto) *verbal testimonies* that constitute the problem of assessment of blame, but conflicting interpretations of actual audio-visual recordings of the event in question. That is, what we have here is a much ‘thicker description’ of what occurred, via both aural and visual materials, and the evidences issue both from a police webcam and from a streamed Facebook video at the site of the shooting, recorded by the victim’s girlfriend.

The story runs thus.

Two policemen in a suburban area of the Twin Cities (one Latino, one white) were doing standard patrol in July 2016 when a black couple with a child in the back seat were spied driving perfectly ordinarily and legally in a suburban area.¹⁶ The Latino policeman, Jeronimo Yanez (who was driving the patrol car) immediately remarked, however (as captured on the webcam), that he ‘D[id] not like the look of that flat nose’ [*sic*] of the black driver, and was inclined to associate him therefore with a robbery that had just been reported to the police; and on noticing that one of the back lights of the couple’s car was burnt out, the two policemen moved to pull it over. In the police webcam we see this occurring, and the black driver, Philando Castile, immediately complying with police questions and requirements. The policemen saunter up to the car, and Castile (who, as was subsequently disclosed, was well used to many police ‘stopping and searching’ events, forty-nine times in all, but had never been convicted for anything) exercises great calm and *politesse* in the interaction with Yanez (Castile more than once calls him ‘sir’), who leans into the driver’s window and asks for Castile’s driver’s licence and evidence of insurance. What follows speedily constitutes the terrible *dénouement*: Castile quickly gives his insurance details to Yanez, but before getting his driver’s licence out of his pocket tells Yanez—again calmly, and one would have thought

¹⁵ I want to record my indebtedness to Dr Faith Glavey Pawl (University of St Thomas, MN) for several engaging and instructive conversations about the Philando Castile case and its relevance to my philosophical discussion of ‘perception’ in this essay. (The shooting of Castile occurred very close to Pawl’s home.)

¹⁶ Once again, there is detailed material online about these events: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Philando_Castile.

sensibly and honestly—that he must mention that he does have a ‘licence to carry’ [a gun] and that his gun is in the same pocket as his driver’s licence. A confused verbal altercation then takes place in which Yanez is clearly panicking and has drawn his own gun; he is telling Castile not to put his hand in his pocket, but this is in contradiction to his demand that he *show* him his driver’s licence; and even as Castile’s girlfriend screams an objection, Yanez shoots at Castile seven times at point-blank range, with two of the bullets piercing his heart. Exactly as this is happening, Castile’s girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, has switched on her Facebook live recording and the whole event goes viral: Castile is now bleeding out and dying, but no ambulance has been called fast enough to do any good (he is eventually declared dead some time later in hospital). Reynolds continues screaming and recording, even as she is pulled out of the car and her mobile phone is thrown to the ground; and her 4-year-old daughter in the back seat is heard expostulating with *her* lest her own ‘Mommy’ also gets shot. Reynolds is handcuffed and arrested (on no obvious legal basis whatsoever), and only at 5 a.m. the next morning let out of police custody.

Anyone who watches the recordings of this event (which remain online¹⁷) is likely to be deeply shocked and traumatized, as well they might be. And yet even here, with all the relevant webcam and Facebook material to hand, subsequent assessments remains split as to the faults involved in the fatal interchange (and Yanez has subsequently been formally exonerated): those supporting the police side simply take it for granted that Yanez was right to shoot in ‘self-defence’; those sympathetic to Castile notice his polite deference, his honesty about his ‘licence to carry’, and his carefulness in alerting the police officer to the ambiguity of placing his hand into the same pocket that also held his driver’s licence.

What then can we conclude on the ‘not seeing’ problem from these two, contrasting, cases, Brown’s and Castile’s? And what further work is needed in this particular essay to explicate their philosophical (and possibly also theological) significance?

First, Tef Poe’s comment on the Brown shooting almost certainly had in mind not just the problem of a white policeman not ‘seeing’ what Michael Brown intended when he put his hands up, but more fundamentally not ‘seeing’ this black man *as* a citizen with certain *rights* who—even though he had indeed committed a minor felony and possibly had some reactive aggressive intent—did not deserve an on-the-spot fatal police wounding when strolling unarmed in the street.¹⁸ This story, note, already represents a ‘perceptual’ problem with enormous added hermeneutical, moral, and legal force; for these reasons it certainly requires

¹⁷ Castile shooting: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85Y_yOm9IhA. This YouTube video includes both the police and the Reynolds recordings, pasted together.

¹⁸ See n. 62 below for some brief comments on the epistemological complexities of the phenomenon of ‘seeing *as*’, as originally expounded by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*.