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## 5 Biko on *non-white* and *black*

### Improving social reality

Brian Epstein

Bantu Steve Biko begins his article "The Definition of Black Consciousness," written in 1971 for the leadership of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), with the following definition and explanation of the category *black*:

We have in our policy manifesto defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations.

This definition illustrates to us a number of things:

- 1 Being black is not a matter of pigmentation—being black is a reflection of a mental attitude.
- 2 Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road to emancipation ...

If one's aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white. Any man who calls a white man 'Baas', any man who serves in the police force or Security Branch is ipso facto a non-white. Black people—real black people—are those who can manage to hold their heads high in defiance rather than willingly surrender their souls to the white man.<sup>1</sup>

This definition—a statement at the core of Black Consciousness philosophy—is at once compelling, provocative, and puzzling. Biko is clearly doing more than defining a word: he is criticizing a category, introducing another, and issuing a call to action. My aim in this chapter is to interpret and develop the intellectual move that Biko is making here and in related writings. In particular, I argue that Biko is engaged in a project that is beginning to attract substantial attention in the analytic literature: the project of the "amelioration" of social concepts and categories. Biko himself—it has been persuasively argued by Mabogo More and Lewis Gordon<sup>2</sup>—writes in the tradition of existential phenomenology. More and Gordon explore Biko's continuity with Frantz Fanon, and in this chapter I draw extensively on their interpretations, attempting to complement and elaborate on these

continuities. I also, however, attempt to show how Biko moves beyond Fanon in crucial ways, solving problems that Fanon confronted. This chapter also draws on George Hull's recent work on Black Consciousness as addressing problems of "hermeneutical injustice."<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the conceptual and epistemological implications of Biko's work, however, I focus on examining its connections with social metaphysics. Biko, I argue, aims to show how we can transform an existing set of oppressive social categories in the world into new social categories.

### Biko's definitions of *non-white* and *black*

Biko wrote "The Definition of Black Consciousness" near the midpoint of the *apartheid* era—twenty or so years after the electoral victory of the National Party and the establishment of *apartheid*, and twenty years before it began to unravel. He was writing in a context in which racial categories were, of course, central to the concerns of the government. The National Party government made ongoing efforts to define and institutionalize race; however, the *apartheid* categories not only pre-dated the *apartheid* system but largely persist today, having been reified over three-and-a-half centuries into identities, family relationships, culture, religion, and geographic divisions. The current census classifies South Africans into five categories: Black African, Coloured, Indian or Asian, White, and Other. "Coloured" is a specifically South African category, applying largely to the descendants of populations from the Cape Colony, populations which included slaves brought from Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and Madagascar; Khoi and San indigenous people; and Dutch and English colonizers. As with other racial categories in South Africa, the grouping was materially, culturally, and socially reinforced through differential treatment and forced migration. *Apartheid* policies were often applied across a mix of racial and ethnic lines. In 1959, for instance, the *apartheid* government outlawed the registration of non-white students at formerly open universities, and created segregated "University Colleges"—separate colleges for Zulu students, for Sotho-Tswana students, for students who spoke Xhosa, for "Coloured" students, and for Indian students.<sup>4</sup> Still there was little ambiguity for the architects of *apartheid* about which lines were ethnic and which racial: the Zulu/Sotho/Tswana/Xhosa lines were ethnic or linguistic divisions within the racial category they called "native" or "Bantu," and the other groups were distinct races. The *apartheid* Population Registration Act of 1950 explicitly defined the three largest of the "races":

A White person is one who is in appearance obviously white—and not generally accepted as Coloured—or who is generally accepted as White—and is not obviously a Non-White, provided that a person shall not be classified as a White person if one of his natural parents has been classified as a Coloured person or a Bantu

A Bantu is a person who is, or is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa ...

A Coloured is a person who is not a White person or a Bantu ....

Even to the authors of this law, it was apparent that these definitions are peculiar and of questionable coherence, as the criteria were changed in six subsequent revisions of the Act. As they stand, these definitions mix a variety of criteria, including appearance, descent, previous classifications, and what is "generally accepted." Yet despite this mix, the architects of *apartheid* regarded racial categories as fundamentally biological.<sup>5</sup> The complexity of the definitions was understood largely as being a consequence of the government wanting them (along with the racial tests also specified in the Act) to serve as practical guides for assessment and classification, to be implemented by the Race Classification Review Boards.<sup>6</sup>

An important feature of Biko's definitions, therefore, is that his categories are clearly political and social. Today, most theorists agree with Biko that racialized categories are complex social constructions, but this was not widely held in South Africa at the time. In this way, the Black Consciousness theorists broke not only with the *apartheid* architects' treatment of race, but also with prevailing opposition views, especially those of "Africanist" thinkers.

This aspect of Biko's approach is now close to conventional wisdom. However, other features of Biko's definitions remain striking and counterintuitive even to a contemporary eye. First, Biko defines *black* extraordinarily broadly: it cuts across any standard understanding of racial difference, even when it is understood as socially constructed. *Black* is much more inclusive than an ordinarily understood racial category, including not only people whom the *apartheid* government would categorize as "natives," but also at least people whom the government would categorize as "Coloured" and "Asiatic."

Second, Biko's definitions are explicitly localized to South Africa. The contingencies of South African law, the traditions and practices of separation and oppression, and the political structures that reinforce *apartheid* are the basis of his categories. In elevating the category *black*, he follows Africanist movements that reject a kind of post-racial universalism or humanism. But in defining the category as fixed to the local context, he even more starkly departs from their categorizations, which in contrast to Biko's are designed to unify people across the African continent and the African diaspora.

Third and most conspicuous is Biko's psychological criterion that marks the difference between *black* and *non-white*. A person fits the category *black* only if that person identifies with a unit that is involved in the struggle against oppression. This, for Biko, is a matter of mental attitudes.

How, then, does Biko define *white*, *non-white*, and *black*? At first blush, the passage seems to give a simple analysis:

- 1 (*White*) Those who are not discriminated against by law or tradition
- 2 (*Non-white*) Those discriminated against by law or tradition, and having the attitude of aspiring to whiteness
- 3 (*Black*) Those discriminated against by law or tradition, and having the attitude of defiance.

Biko, it seems, marks out three mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories of people in South Africa. The non-whites and blacks are those who are discriminated against by law and tradition, and they are distinguished from one another by their mental attitudes.

This simple reading, however, does not withstand scrutiny. Biko's definitions of *black* and *non-white* seem parallel to one another, but the two make interestingly different intellectual moves. One indication of this is the vast difference between how the words "non-white" and "black" were respectively used in South Africa during the early *apartheid* era. Prior to the work of Biko and other Black Consciousness theorists, the term "black" had largely been absent from the South African context.<sup>7</sup> The term "non-white," on the other hand, was ubiquitous.<sup>8</sup> Many *apartheid* laws and policies did draw on finer distinctions, with differential treatment accorded to a variety of racial subcategories. But the physical signage in the country, for the most part, was marked "white" and "non-white," or equivalently (for the *apartheid* authorities) "European" and "non-European." These were the labels painted on signs, walls, and walkways restricting access to trains, businesses, bathrooms, government offices, queues, beaches, park benches, and more.

In the *apartheid* context, the distinction between *white* and *non-white* is exhaustive, covering the entire population. It is conceivable that Biko, in his definition, is splitting the category *non-white* in two: he retains the term "non-white" to refer to people formerly known as *non-white* and who have the additional characteristic that they have such-and-such an attitude, and he introduces a new term, "black," for people formerly known as *non-white* but who have a contrasting attitude. But this, I will argue, is a misinterpretation. In introducing the category *black*, Biko is not so much introducing a third category as he is transforming one inter-related pair of categories into another pair. He is performing what we might call an "ameliorative project,"<sup>9</sup> criticizing and replacing a problematic social construct. The psychological differences between *non-white* and *black* are relevant to this transformation, but I will argue that they are not the only—or even the crucial—difference between these two categories. They are as much the product of Biko's transformation as they are the source of it.

### ***Non-white* in the context of Fanon**

Understanding the ameliorative moves Biko is making with his definition of *black*, then, depends on clarifying his treatment of *non-white*. I follow More 2008, 2014 and Gordon 2008 in their claims that Biko's treatment of *non-white* is significantly influenced by Fanon and should be understood as a development of Fanon's views. I will suggest, however—drawing in part on a paradox raised by Gordon—that Biko develops his categories somewhat differently than Fanon does. Doing so gives Biko the tools to accomplish tasks that are not available to Fanon: he avoids the paradoxes that trouble Fanon's claims, and more importantly, is able to make an ameliorative transformation—i.e., the transformation from *non-white* to *black*—that Fanon could not. In Biko's innovations, we can see a number of ways in which the amelioration of categories can occur, and

in which the construction and re-construction of social categories interact with political aims.

A note about terminology: Fanon, writing in the 1950s in France and Algeria and trained by Aimé Césaire and other *Négritude* thinkers, describes and analyzes "*noir*" and "*nègre*," both of which are obviously different from Biko's "black." Fanon's term "*blanc*" is also somewhat different from Biko's "white," given Biko's emphasis on the local specificity of the category, but here the ambiguity is not as problematic. To keep the categorizations discussed by Fanon distinct from those of Biko, I will follow Gordon 2015 in using the terms "white" and "*nègre*" when discussing Fanon.

Fanon diagnoses these categories as having a kind of built-in negation or opposition: part of the nature of *nègre* is to be negative, and to be in opposition to *white*. Fanon argues that the racist distinction between *white* and *nègre* cannot be understood as simply a division of humanity into groups. He builds on Hegel's claim that human consciousness, both of oneself and of other people, is built on the mutual recognition of one another as human. There is no consciousness—no self—without mutual recognition. Fanon approvingly quotes Hegel: "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness: that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized."<sup>10</sup> Mutual recognition is the basis for self-consciousness, and hence for humanity.

But while Fanon agrees on the centrality of recognition for humanity, he denies that the encounter of *white* and *nègre* is one of mutual recognition. At the time Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*, the dialectic of master and slave was regarded by Francophone philosophers as the centerpiece of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.<sup>11</sup> But Fanon observes that the relation between *white* and *nègre*, or between colonial master and colonized, bears little resemblance to the complex interplay of conflict, independence, and recognition that Hegel develops. "For Hegel," writes Fanon, "there is reciprocity; here the master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work."<sup>12</sup> For a person to be in the category *nègre* is precisely to be *unrecognized*. It is to have one's humanity withheld.

This failure of recognition manifests itself in the ordinary experience of daily living. Among the most potent illustrations Fanon gives is not the encounter of a slave with a colonial master, or an encounter with a virulent racist, but an encounter with a "well-meaning liberal." A brief vignette in *Black Skin, White Masks* recounts a moment of typical daily experience. As Fanon—or any black man—walks by, a white child calls out to his mother, "Look, a Negro! *Maman*, a Negro!" The mother reacts: "Ssh! You'll make him angry. Don't pay attention to him, monsieur, he doesn't realize you're just as civilized as we are."<sup>13</sup>

It seems to the mother, in this vignette, that she is calling out the child's rudeness, correcting his misplaced fears. Her reply is not openly racist, but is a white liberal's response: she reasons, explains, and justifies her way to acknowledging the humanity of the *nègre*. Only, this reply is not so different from that of the open racist. Imagine, by contrast, how the mother would have reacted had her child

called out similarly upon encountering another white: "Look, a White! *Maman*, a White!" She would have been puzzled about what the child could possibly have meant, and would have assumed the listener to be equally puzzled rather than offended. In that situation, her "just as civilized" explanation would not even make sense.

When *white* encounters *white*, Fanon observes, there is no need for reasoning one's way into the humanity of the other person—a justification of the humanity of another human is otiose. That encounter is treated as the "base case" of recognition. *White* encountering *nègre*—even in the case of the well-meaning liberal—is a departure from that base case: it involves a request or demand for justification of the humanity of the other. Only, the issue of that demand itself makes it impossible for the demand to be fulfilled. As soon as person A needs *justification* that person B has the attributes of humanity, that is exactly for A to undercut mutual recognition—i.e., to refuse the constitutiveness of B's recognition for A's own self-consciousness.

In short, Fanon argues that the division between *white* and *nègre* is not a matter of classifying people according to their attributes. It is even a mistake to see the division as an illiberal classification of some people as valuable and deserving of privilege, and others as flawed and deserving of servitude. Nor can it be rectified by the liberal project of equalizing resources and privileges: the division is more fundamental than that. The base case for humanity-with-no-need-for-justification is *white*. The category *nègre* is derivative and set up in opposition to that base case. Rather than the categories *white* and *nègre* being a way to divide up humanity, the category *nègre* undercuts the humanity of the individual who falls into that category.

### Fanon's paradoxes

Fanon is a diagnostician of human tragedy: he reveals the impossible and contradictory condition of a human denied his humanity. At the outset of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asks, "What does the black man want? Running the risk of angering my black brothers, I shall say that a Black is not a man ... This essay will attempt to understand the Black-White relationship. The white man is locked in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness ... How can we break the cycle?"<sup>14</sup> Over the course of the book, Fanon explains the relationship, showing through theory and experience the withholding of recognition. But he does not answer his question—there is no breaking of the cycle, or, at least, no rational path to do so. The person categorized as *nègre* faces an unsolvable dilemma. There is nothing he or she can do to force recognition, even (or perhaps especially) in contexts where the white insists that there is no difference between the races.<sup>15</sup> As Fanon discusses in the section of *The Wretched of the Earth* titled "On Violence,"<sup>16</sup> there is no way even to raise the issue of colonial injustice without that being perceived as an act of violence. Violence damages all parties, and he does not advocate it, but in a sense violence is inevitable. Still, there is also no reason to have confidence in its success. There is no rational or deliberative route out of a classification built on impossible demands.

This paradoxical position for people categorized as *nègre* is an acute problem, even more so for a political activist such as Biko. However, there is also an even more serious philosophical problem in Fanon's diagnosis of the nature of the category. On Fanon's account the withholding of recognition precludes self-consciousness. It means that to be placed in the category *nègre* is literally to inhabit a state of non-humanity, to fail to be human. This, however, seems like an absurd result—is it even coherent?

One way out of the difficulty is to argue that the withholding of recognition is a matter of racist beliefs or ascriptions, rather than genuine withholding of recognition itself. Gordon 1993, 1995 discusses an approach along these lines. He explores the idea that racism involves a kind of Sartrean "bad faith"—a refusal to consciously acknowledge what one knows to be true. Racism, according to Gordon, is dehumanizing; it involves the refusal to ascribe humanity to someone that the racist knows is human. But even the idea of "dehumanizing" someone, Gordon argues, requires the prior acknowledgement of that person's humanity. Neither racism as bad faith nor racism as dehumanization makes sense if recognition is withheld at the outset. This would mean that anti-black racist categories do not exactly involve a lack of mutual recognition; rather, they involve the failure to acknowledge that there is mutual recognition. This proposal would retain the idea that mutual recognition is constitutive of self-consciousness, but deny that self-consciousness has been undermined by a lack of mutual recognition. Rather, anti-black racism is a kind of misclassification: *white* involves the incorrect classification of a subset of people as being the base case of humanity, and *nègre* the incorrect classification of another subset as lacking humanity.

There is much to be said for this account, but it is not clear how compatible it is with Fanon's claims, including the part of Hegel that he endorses. (I do not take Gordon to be ascribing this view to Fanon, but rather to be exploring the idea on its own merits.) On the "bad faith" diagnosis, racism or the withholding of explicit recognition amounts to making a willful mistake, falsely classifying a person in a category to which she does not actually belong. Only, in that case, it is not clear why this withholding should be so important in the first place. Living in a world pervaded by false beliefs is psychologically corrosive, perhaps even leading people to the point of doubting their own humanity. But it falls far short of Fanon's argument that their humanity itself is compromised. It also does not seem to line up with Fanon's diagnosis of the racism of the liberal: after all, the error of the white liberal is the opposite, i.e., to mistakenly believe that she is respecting her interlocutor as human. Nor does it yield an unsolvable dilemma: there would be a rational response, i.e., to correct the false beliefs.

My aim here is not to come to resolution on the best way to read Fanon, nor is it to solve these puzzles or to criticize Fanon's premises. Rather, I suggest that Fanon's *white/nègre* distinction, and the complexities it faces, be seen as a point of departure for Biko and the *white/non-white* distinction that in turn is the basis for Biko's category *black*. Biko comes to the table in a different racist context and with urgent political aims, and armed with Fanon's approach as a compelling but problematic theoretical framework.

### Biko: from deprivation of recognition to deprivation of agency

Like Fanon, Biko regards liberalism as self-deceptive, if not openly hypocritical. Biko largely agrees with Fanon's diagnosis of its failure: it does nothing to counter the withholding of the humanity of non-whites despite congratulating itself for its enlightened perspective. Worse, in its "enlightened" actions, it insidiously reinforces that withholding of humanity.

Biko, however, diverges from Fanon with respect to what exactly is withheld. He is not principally concerned with the deprivation of recognition, but rather the deprivation of agency. The distinction between *white* and *non-white* is fundamentally a distinction between those who can act and those who are deprived of the capacity to act.

Biko describes the problems with liberalism in the political more than the interpersonal sphere. For example, one of the triggers for Biko and his peers to found SASO in 1968 was their experience with the putatively liberal National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). NUSAS at the time was the main student organization in South Africa, coordinating anti-apartheid activities across campuses. But though it was nominally a multiracial organization, it was run by white students at the leading (i.e., white) universities.<sup>17</sup> White domination in the governance of an organization supposedly aiming to counter *apartheid* was manifestly absurd to Biko. He points out that some of the behavior that exacerbated the disengagement of black students from NUSAS was just open racism: at the 1967 conference, for instance, white students were housed on campus where the conference was held, while black students had to stay in a church building some distance away and take buses onto campus for the meetings. But Biko also discusses structural reasons behind the disparity of agency in the organization. One seemingly minor but telling factor was the fact that NUSAS, like most national organizations, conducted its business exclusively in English, while the "Bantu education system" of the *apartheid* era was expressly designed to limit English literacy among African youth.<sup>18</sup> Working in English was necessary to have political impact in South Africa, but it also affected the internal dynamics in the NUSAS meetings:

Unfortunately the books you read are in English, English is a second language to you; you have probably been taught in a vernacular especially during these days of Bantu education up to Standard 6 ... During the old days of NUSAS where [white] students would be talking about something that you as a black man have experienced in your day to day life, but your powers of articulation are not as good as theirs ... you are forced into a subservient role of having to say yes to what they are saying, talking about what you have experienced, which they have not experienced, because you cannot express it so well. This in a sense inculcates also in numerous students a sense of inadequacy.<sup>19</sup>

This is a case in which liberalism undermines the agency it would seem aimed at promoting. A white liberal might intend to take action to rectify a wrong he sees in the world. And the liberal correctly sees that the optimal route for taking action

in South African society, structured as it is, is in English and in the rhetorical style he learned in prep school and university. Thus, in that social structure, he correctly identifies himself as an effective actor, and conducts meetings in English to achieve what he sees as a moral end. But in doing so, the liberal seizes agency. His acting in a way that is instrumentally effective for accomplishing a supposedly moral aim is simultaneously an act of depriving non-whites of agency.

For Biko as for Fanon, the liberal reaction to racism is self-undermining—but it is self-undermining in a different way. Fanon's liberal reaction involves justification, which itself undermines recognition. For Biko, in contrast, the liberal reaction involves the white taking action—even taking action with the aim of rectifying wrongs—that itself undermines the agency of the non-white.

Biko demonstrates his point in a similar way to Fanon—by describing lived experience. Biko's descriptions, however, include physical systems of oppression as much as they do face-to-face interactions. Among the most powerful repressive mechanisms of *apartheid*, for instance, was the forced migration of populations to townships. Not only were the living conditions in the townships poor, but the distances alone structured and constrained the lives of their inhabitants:

the townships are placed long distances away from the working areas where black people work, and the transport conditions are appalling, trains are overcrowded all the time, taxis that they use are overcrowded, the whole travelling situation is dangerous, and by the time a guy gets to work he has really been through a mill; he gets to work, there is no peace either at work, his boss sits on him to eke out of him even the last effort in order to boost up production. This is the common experience of the black man. When he gets back from work through the same process of travelling conditions, he can only take out his anger on his family which is the last defence that he has.<sup>20</sup>

The placement of townships—just close enough to commute to work in the cities but distant enough that the commute itself rids people of any free time they might have—is a mechanism for depriving individuals of their ability to act. And that, of course, is just one structure of constraint. Under the *apartheid* regime, he points out, non-whites are constrained to the point that they live in fear even of actions they may unwittingly have taken.

No average black man can ever at any moment be absolutely sure that he is not breaking a law. There are so many laws governing the lives and behaviour of black people that sometimes one feels that the police only need to page at random through their statute book to be able to get a law under which to charge a victim.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the sort of dehumanization Biko describes is not so much a failure to be recognized as it is a kind of imprisonment—an overwhelming set of constraints that determine action.

As illustrated by the sense of inadequacy of the non-white students in NUSAS discussions, this deprivation of agency has psychological consequences, which feed back into the loss of agency. This idea had already been in circulation for a long time among South African theorists. In his 1946 "Policy of the Congress Youth League"—an African nationalist youth movement in South Africa—Anton Lembede writes:

Moral and spiritual degeneration manifests itself in such abnormal and pathological phenomena as loss of self-confidence, inferiority complex, a feeling of frustration, the worship and idolisation of white men, foreign leaders and ideologies. All these are symptoms of a pathological state of mind.<sup>22</sup>

Biko agrees, but here too he connects it with the material conditions in which non-whites live:

The black man in himself has developed a certain sense of alienation, he rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good ... The homes are different, the streets are different, the lighting is different, so you tend to begin to feel that there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that completeness goes with whiteness. This is carried through to adulthood when the black man has got to live and work.<sup>23</sup>

Such psychological effects are, according to Biko, central to the mechanisms of control of the *apartheid* system:

... the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Once the latter has been so effectively manipulated and controlled by the oppressor so as to make the oppressed believe that he is a liability to the white man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do that will really scare the powerful masters.<sup>24</sup>

Still, for Biko the psychology is only one aspect of the mechanism of control. It is a part of the larger structure, in which the agency of non-whites is blocked.

### ***Non-white and the inclusiveness of Biko's categories***

Biko agrees with Lembede in diagnosing psychological pathologies as a product of living under *apartheid*. But he and the other Black Consciousness thinkers break in a striking way with a more central feature of the approach of Lembede and other African nationalists. Lembede places the solidarity of a unified African nation at the center of his policy statement:

Africa is a blackman's country: Africans are the natives of Africa and they have inhabited Africa, their Motherland, from time immemorial; Africa belongs to them ...

Cooperation between Africans and other Non-Europeans on common problems and issues may be highly desirable. But this occasional cooperation can only take place between Africans as a single unit and other Non-European groups as separate units. Non-European unity is a fantastic dream which has no foundation in reality.<sup>25</sup>

Black Consciousness thinkers explicitly reject this: the categories *non-white* and *black* cut across the different racial categories of *apartheid*. At the same time, they also reject the view that had hitherto been regarded as its main alternative—a non-racial, post-racial, or multi-racial vision of a liberal society, as defended in particular by the African National Congress.<sup>26</sup> Rather, they insist on exactly what Lembede rejects as having "no foundation in reality": that the fundamental unit in opposition to *apartheid* is non-Europeans.

To be sure, there is obvious political value in unifying the oppressed in opposition to *apartheid*. A well-worn tactic of colonial powers had been to pit local populations against one another in order to relieve pressure on themselves, and the *apartheid* government was well-practiced in that skill. The editorial of the SASO newsletter of September 1970 made this point explicitly:

Placed in context therefore, the "black consciousness" attitude seeks to define one's enemy more clearly and to broaden the base from which we are operating. It is a deliberate attempt by all of us to counteract the "divide and rule" attitude of the evil-doers.<sup>27</sup>

Yet political expediency hardly suffices to explain their approach. It is one thing to form alliances between groups, and another to propose that the fundamental category that defines a movement does not break down along racial lines. A different passage in the same editorial expresses the foundations for the movement's treatment of "black":

The essence of what I am saying is that the term "black" must be seen in its right context. No new category is being created but a "re-Christening" is taking place. We are merely refusing to be regarded as non-persons and claim the right to be called positively. No one group is exclusively black.<sup>28</sup>

This builds directly on Fanon's strategy. Biko recognizes the *apartheid* authorities as having chosen an uncannily accurate term—"non-white"—for their signs. Unlike the terms "native" or "Bantu," the term "non-white" openly displays that it is a contrastive term, one that marks a category in opposition to the base case. This term also makes it clear—even more than is apparent with a term like "native" or "nègre"—that the category it denotes is part of an interdefined pair, *white/non-white*.

In the last section, I stressed one important point of difference between Biko and Fanon. Rather than a lack of recognition, Biko focuses on a lack of agency at the heart of *apartheid*. This difference, however, is tied to another equally

important one. In Fanon, the lack of recognition is associated with the singularity of anti-black racism. While Biko draws on Fanon's insight, this singularity is not the foundation on which he builds his diagnosis or categorization. In identifying the category *non-white* as involving a withholding of agency, Biko identifies a different group as the one whose agency has been withheld: all those whom the *apartheid* authorities categorize as non-white.

Biko's aim in introducing the category *black* is to break out of the *white/non-white* dichotomy, replacing the category *non-white* with one that is neither derivative nor negative. In his agency-centered understanding of that dichotomy, I will suggest, he already avoids the internal paradox that arises for Fanon. But his more important aim is to solve Fanon's problem of action or remediation: in generating a category that is not the negation of a "base case," he is also able to show what actions are to be taken.

### Fundamentality and negativity in categories

In formal logic, negation operates at the level of sentences or formulas: to say "The window is not opaque" is to deny the proposition that the window is opaque. It is not to introduce a new property, *not-opaque*, and apply that to the window. To be sure, we can make sense of the property *not-opaque* should we want to—but if so, it is best understood as a *complement* rather than a negation. That is, given some domain of application (such as the set of windows or the set of objects in general), *opaque* and *not-opaque* divide the domain in two. That does not make *not-opaque* a negation: just as *not-opaque* is the complement of *opaque*, *not-not-opaque* (i.e., *opaque*) is the complement of *not-opaque*. This point is even clearer if we call the two categories "opaque" and "transparent." If *opaque* is the same as *not-transparent*, and *transparent* is the same as *not-opaque*, then which is supposed to be the negative one? It makes no sense to regard one of these categories as "negative" or "a negation."

How, then, are we to understand the "negativity" of *nègre* and of *non-white*? When Fanon reveals that *nègre* should be understood as a negative category, he clearly is doing something different than dividing humanity into two groups. As we have noted, the categories *white* and *nègre* are not even complements, since even on a racist categorization many people fall into neither one nor the other. Moreover, even if they were, their complementarity would fail to capture the ontological asymmetry between *white* and *nègre*. *Nègre* is not just a different category from *white*, but one that is ontologically derivative or subsidiary.

Recent work in metaphysics gives us tools for exploring the idea that one category may be more "fundamental" than another. We can extend this to help clarify the idea that one category may be a "base case" and another a kind of derivative negation of the first.

Categories and properties are often analyzed in terms of the "necessary and sufficient conditions" for an object to be a member of a category or to possess a property. For instance, an object has the property *being a bachelor* if and only if that object is a man and is also unmarried. To many philosophers, giving necessary

and sufficient conditions has seemed to be the way to give a full accounting of the nature of a category. One problem with this (noted as far back as Plato's *Euthyphro*) is the symmetry between the defining properties and the defined properties. With only necessary and sufficient conditions, there would be nothing to stop us from analyzing the category *unmarried man* in terms of *bachelor*, rather than the other way around. Yet it seems that these two are not exactly symmetrical: it seems that the property *being a bachelor* is "built out of" *being unmarried* and *being a man*. That is, *bachelor* seems less "fundamental" than *unmarried* and *man*, and for that matter *unmarried* seems less fundamental than *married*.

One kind of fundamentality that metaphysicians have begun to explore regards certain *facts* being more fundamental than other *facts*.<sup>29</sup> The fact that John is a bachelor, for instance, obtains because John is an unmarried man. In contrast, the fact that John is an unmarried man does not obtain because John is a bachelor.<sup>30</sup>

A less-explored but more pertinent kind of fundamentality has to do with the social construction of categories. An inquiry into social construction asks: *What explains the fact that bachelor is a social category? What facts about the world and about our society set up bachelor to be one of our social categories?* These are questions about a different kind of metaphysical explanation. In contrast to the questions, *What are the contours of X? What conditions does an object need to satisfy in order to fall into category X?*, the inquiry into social construction asks, *In virtue of what is category X carved out to have the contours it does?*<sup>31</sup> A second and different kind of fundamentality, then, arises in the context of social construction: new categories are not socially constructed out of the blue, but make use of old existing categories. One category is more fundamental than another category, in this sense, if facts about the first are involved in socially constructing the second.

These two kinds of fundamentality—in the building blocks of social facts and in the construction of social categories—open the door to several ways that categories can be negations or oppositional. A useful way to understand the fundamentality of *white* with respect to *nègre*, as well as *nègre* being a negative or oppositional category, is as a matter of how they are respectively socially constructed. Likewise for the fundamentality of *white* with respect to *non-white* and the negativity of *non-white*.

To see this it is useful to elaborate a bit on how the categories *white* and *nègre* are socially constructed following Fanon's approach, and *white* and *non-white* following Biko's. We can see Fanon's account as involving a sequence of derivative constructions, starting with the category *human*, then setting up the category *white* as appropriating that preceding category, and then building the category *nègre* in opposition to *white*. For each of these categories, we can profile the facts that generate or socially construct them. As I described earlier, Fanon draws on Hegel's account of the construction of *human* (or of *self-conscious*): the facts that generate this category include the processes of struggle and mutual recognition. This constructed category *human* carries along with it a variety of norms and default ways its members are to be treated. Members immediately belong to the community and are recognized by default. The constructed category *white* is built

atop the category *human*: *white* is set up by attitudes, practices, and structures in which people with white skin are treated according to those norms and defaults.

For Fanon, the category *nègre* is constructed by more than just the practices and structures by which whites appropriate the category *human*. The singularity of anti-black racism involves not just a contrast, but a denial or rejection of the applicability of the norms and defaults that accompany humanity specifically to people with black skin. The denial or negativity in the construction of the category *nègre* consists in specifically counteracting—through attitudes and face-to-face interactions—the norms and defaults of humanity that *white* is set up to have.

In some ways the case of Biko's *non-white* is clearer: the withholding of agency by structures of *apartheid* is less abstract than the face-to-face withholding of recognition. At the same time, however, it is easier in the case of Biko's *non-white* to be misled with regard to the sort of "negativity" or "negation" involved in it. Unlike Fanon's categories, the South African categories *white* and *non-white* are complements in the logical sense: they apportion all people into those two categories without overlap. This risks obscuring the point that Biko's treatment of the opposition of these two categories is much like Fanon's: in particular, *non-white* is derivative with regard to *white*, and it is socially constructed as negative in a similar way. It is true that *white* and *non-white* have complementary extensions, but this is not the main way in which *non-white* is a derivative and negative category.

Casting Biko's approach in a similar sequence, the *apartheid* category *white* is constructed with the aim of appropriating agency, i.e., the category to which individuals who act freely in the world, subject to ordinary constraints, belong. *Agent*, in the base case, is set up by practices and social structures in which individuals understand themselves to act, exercise their own capacities, and accommodate others in their exercise of theirs. Even in struggling against one another, agents understand the agency of others and treat them as such. Connected to this are norms as to how it is rational to act in order to get things accomplished in the world. The category *white*, then, is set up in such a way as to appropriate agency entirely on behalf of a particular group of people, where the mutual norms associated with agency apply to and only to whites. In *apartheid* it is clear how this is done: social, legal, and physical structures and practices are put in place so that whites exclusively have the capacities of agents and are subject to the norms of agency.

The construction of the category *non-white* is derivative. Facts about *white*—that there is such a constructed category, that certain people are marked out as belonging to it, that it is constructed so as to be associated by default with the norms and powers of agents—figure into the construction of *non-white*. Other features of *apartheid* society also figure into the construction of the category *non-white*, such as structural impediments to the exercise of agency, laws, business structures, educational institutions, geographic placement of populations, and transportation systems. And psychological facts also figure into the construction of *non-white*: the alienation and sense of incapacity that are generated by the structural constraints feed back into the construction of a category in which

agency is undercut. Together these construct *non-white* as a category that counteracts the potential of non-whites to exercise agency.

In describing both Fanon's and Biko's accounts of social construction, I have left one important aspect of the social construction of the category *white* to the side: namely, the reciprocal derivativeness of *white* on *nègre* or on *non-white*. Even if *white* is constructed to be the "base case," it is not yet a racialized category, nor is it salient that it is marked, until it is set up in confrontation with the "derivative case." Moreover, the facts that figure into the social construction of *white* are affected reciprocally by the social construction of *nègre* and *non-white*. Thus it is a simplification to regard *white* as strictly fundamental and *nègre* and *non-white* as strictly derivative. Still, it would be a bigger distortion to emphasize the interdefinition of the categories in Fanon and Biko. Fanon is explicitly rejecting the prevailing interpretation of the master-slave relationship in which the two involve genuine reciprocity. Rather, he diagnoses anti-black racism as fundamentally asymmetric. Likewise, Biko regards white *apartheid* society as making use of non-white labor to its advantage, but the fact that whites are able to exercise agency is not explained to a significant degree in terms of a story of reciprocal definition. Even though the *apartheid* category *white* is to some extent constructed by its opposition to the category *non-white*, that is not a central part of the account. Even more importantly, Biko in particular does not much concern himself with a diagnosis or definition of the category *white*. His concern is the replacement of the *white/non-white* field of categories with a different one.

### Biko's category *black*

The inclusiveness of Biko's category *black* is one of its most striking characteristics. Some theorists have gone so far as to argue that even whites can be black in Biko's sense—Xolela Mangcu, for instance, proposes that whites who "pass" as black, or who are born into black communities, fit Biko's definition.<sup>32</sup> But though this interpretation comports with Biko's rejection of traditional racial lines in the category, the definition explicitly rules this out: the category applies to those who are discriminated against by law or tradition.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, to broaden Biko's definition conflicts with his central philosophical move. The transformation from *non-white* to *black* does not change the extension of the category, i.e., the people to whom the category applies. Rather, that transformation is precisely designed to preserve that extension. This is the sense in which, as the SASO editorial clarified, "no new category is being created but a 're-Christening' is taking place. We are merely refusing to be regarded as non-persons and claim the right to be called positively. No one group is exclusively black." The category *black* does not divide off certain people from the category *non-white* according to the color of their skin, or according to the African-ness of their ancestry, or even according to their attitudes.

How can the category *black* have the same extension as *non-white*—i.e., have the exact same people who fall into one category fall into another—and yet be an importantly different category? And how can we square this idea with Biko's

characterization of *black* as involving radically different psychological attitudes than does *non-white*?

Biko sets up *black* as a non-derivative category. It is not a counterpart or negation of a prior category of whiteness, which was set up as having the powers of agency by default. But he also recognizes that it makes no sense to construct an idealized category out of thin air, pretending that race-based structures of oppression do not exist and that all we need to do is adopt a hopeful non-racial humanism. Like *non-white*, the category *black* is historically and geographically situated. It is partly constructed by the *apartheid* impediments to the exercise of agency—laws, geography, etc.

Considering the actual impediments to agency in the context, we see that they apply exactly to those people that *apartheid* defines as *non-white*. This explains why the extension of the category *black* is the same as the extension of *non-white*. The extension of *black* is complementary to that of *white* because social structures and existing conditions are drawn—in the real-world *apartheid* context—along the lines of *white/non-white*. These actual conditions and structures in society, as well as the history of discrimination, figure into carving out the category *black* to have the extension it does.

Still, carving out the category *black* in part on the basis of structures of oppression is different than carving it out as a derivative category to *white*. Given that they are both socially constructed by the *apartheid* context, *black* and *non-white* are closely related to one another. But they are not constructed by all the same facts, or in the same way as one another.

In the construction of *black* as distinct from *non-white*, the psychological facts do make a crucial difference, and we need to disentangle several roles that psychological facts play in Biko's account. The two sets of psychological states Biko mentions are the alienation, self-doubt, and sense of lack of agency associated with living under the *apartheid* system (what I will call the "negative states") and the feeling of defiance and sense of agency in the struggle against *apartheid* (the "positive states").

The negative states are involved in two feedback mechanisms: they are caused by the structures of *apartheid* and reinforce those structures, and they also causally reinforce themselves. The negative states are also involved in the construction of the category *non-white*: they are part of what sets *non-white* up as the non-agentive counterpart to *white*.

Putting forward an analysis of *non-white* as Biko does also has psychological consequences. Making people aware of the category *non-white* is jarring and—it must be acknowledged—potentially even hurtful to the people oppressed in the *apartheid* system. When a person applies the term "non-white" to him- or herself, it indicates acquiescence or even complicity with the *apartheid* categorization of humanity. Yet people had no choice but to classify themselves as such. Dozens of times a day, in the course of ordinary activities, one would have had to follow the signage and classify oneself as non-white. Under pain of violence, it would have been impossible to avoid this repeated self-classification. Accepting Biko's definition means being in a continual state of self-reproach.

Biko was not of course suggesting that individuals had the power on their own to ignore *apartheid* restrictions or that they should pointlessly suffer *apartheid* violence, only to be forced to conform anyway. He was, however, suggesting that this sort of self-reproach was different from the negative psychology that leads to acquiescence. Recognizing the inappropriateness of this self-classification is already to take on a kind of agency. Biko treats the attitude of defiance not only as the appropriate response to this enforced self-classification, but also as the likely outcome of being made aware of it.

The positive psychological states, then, are in part caused by awareness of the negative states and their role in the construction of the category *non-white*. The positive states are part of what sets up the category *black*, and here too there is a feedback mechanism: awareness of the character of the category *black* reinforces the positive states. The positive states, in turn, have causal consequences: they lead to action that challenges *apartheid* structures, and also counteract the negative states, which diminishes the extent to which those states buttress *apartheid*. If Biko is correct to claim that "the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed," then it is plausible to hypothesize that provoking a changed psychological response—first the response of being aware of the repeated self-classification into the *apartheid* category, second the response of defiance—is a potent counter-weapon in the hands of the oppressed.

Earlier I stressed Biko's discussion of practical constraints as central to the deprivation of agency under *apartheid*. It is not just psychological facts, but material ones, that set up the category *white* as having the powers and norms of agency by default, and that deprive the category *non-white* of those powers and norms. Biko's approach does put significant weight on a changed psychology as setting up a category that overturns these norms and powers. In this he is influenced—perhaps too much—by Sartre's confidence in the ability of individual choice to affect the nature of the individual. But it is also possible to see Biko as putting forward a causal hypothesis: that changes in attitudes are likely to cascade into changed actions and changed structures, so that while they do not immediately lead to the elimination of structures of oppression, they do at least lead to the genuine exercise of agency even in the face of that oppression.

The category *black* remains problematic: like *non-white*, it is set up in part by the oppressive structures of the *apartheid* context, and would not be a category at all without that history and background. Yet, even while acknowledging that context, it aims to strip away from *non-white* the deprivation of agency which is itself largely a product of those structures.

Biko's analysis also circumvents the two difficulties that Fanon faces. The paradox in Fanon's analysis arises from humans having their humanity withheld. There is nothing inherently paradoxical, on the other hand, about the idea in Biko that people can be agents and yet be fully deprived of their capacity to act. Likewise, Biko's approach provides a clearer route to changing this situation, and rectifying the deprivation of agency. Fanon's analysis left little room for rational improvements to oppressive structures of mutual recognition. Changing a near-complete deprivation of agency—as Biko advocates—may

require radical changes in structures and attitudes, but it is clearer what changes can serve this aim. Even psychological changes alone hold promise in this regard.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Biko makes two philosophical innovations in his definitions: first, the shift from analyzing the negative counterpart to *white* in terms of the withholding of recognition to an analysis in terms of the deprivation of agency; and second, the construction of an improved category, one that is neither derivative nor negative (in the senses I have tried to clarify).

I want to emphasize the significance of this second innovation. The critique of concepts and socially constructed categories has been central to philosophical inquiry since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Marx and Nietzsche in particular are associated with the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—removing the veneer of naturalness or goodness associated with commonplace social categories and revealing their oppressive cores. Fanon’s work on the phenomenology of *Négritude* can be seen in part as a brilliant contribution to this tradition. A continual difficulty with work along these lines, however, is the next move, subsequent to the critique. There is a temptation simply to erase or dispose of a problematic category, without taking a practical look at the plausibility and consequences of such an erasure. Or instead to propose a utopian set of categories that do not reflect the structural conditions on the ground. Or else to retreat to an earlier—often idealized—historical scheme. None of these are options for Biko: if his philosophical work is to have any practical use at all, he needs to replace the *apartheid* field of categories with one that is an ethical improvement, aspirational without being unrealistic, and sensitive to existing conditions.

Magaziner (2010:42) comments that Biko at times appears to forget Fanon’s critique of Sartre, and instead to agree with Sartre’s characterization of *Négritude* as the “weak term” in a dialectical process that leads to a non-racial future.<sup>34</sup> It is surely right to observe that Sartre’s narrative is distasteful and overly teleological. Still, it is reasonable for Biko to remain uncommitted to a vision of exactly how things will play out in the long term, especially if structures of oppression can be overcome. It is not just unproductive, but counterproductive, to insist on a narrative that predicts and imposes an ultimate or eventual set of social categories. To do so would force the first step—the amelioration of an existing category—to conform to a fanciful narrative about the future. Will structures of oppression be completely eliminated? Will racial categories become irrelevant, and would that be an improvement? Hard to say in the long term, but in the short term it would be foolish to pretend that structures of oppression are not carved into the geography of the nation. For Biko, the category *black* does not need to be constructed as a component of some ultimate or final scheme, nor as a stepping stone to some other scheme he aims at. Instead, it is an improvement, a replacement of an oppressive set of categories by a better one, as one element of a set of actions to take against South African *apartheid*.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Biko 2004 ([1978], p. 52).
- 2 See, for instance, More (2008, 2014); Gordon (2008).
- 3 Hull (2016).
- 4 These colleges, instituted by the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, were Ngoye, Turfloop, Fort Hare (which had previously been somewhat open), Bellville, and Durban Westville. See Lapping (1986).
- 5 See for instance the Tomlinson Commission report (Tomlinson 1955), Dubow (1995).
- 6 Horrell (1958).
- 7 More (2014, pp. 174–5) discusses the appropriation of the term “black” by BCM theorists, in parallel to the re-appropriation of the term “nègre” by *Négritude* theorists in France (cf. Césaire 1972 [1955], p. 74). Biko discusses the choice and connotations of the word “black” for BCM in his testimony in the BPC (Black People’s Convention)-SASO trial of 1976 (see Biko 2004 [1978], pp. 114–18).
- 8 I am grateful to George Hull and Danwood Chirwa for discussion of this point.
- 9 Haslanger (2000, 2014).
- 10 Fanon (2008 [1952], p. 192).
- 11 This was largely due to the work of Kojève and Hyppolite.
- 12 Fanon (2008 [1952], p. 195 n. 10).
- 13 Fanon (2008 [1952], p. 93).
- 14 Fanon (2008 [1952], pp. xii–xiv).
- 15 Fanon (2008 [1952], p. 196).
- 16 Fanon (2004 [1961]).
- 17 Preceding the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, the Afrikaans-language universities were already limited to white students, as was Rhodes University. Witwatersrand, UCT, and Natal, however, had been somewhat open in their admission. The 1959 Act ended that practice.
- 18 The Bantu Education Act of 1953 shuttered nearly all mission schools, which had educated the vast majority of the black population in South Africa, replacing them with segregated schools funded by a limited tax base and staffed by teachers who had not themselves finished high school.
- 19 Biko testimony in May 1976 SASO-BPC trial (Biko 2004 [1978], p. 119).
- 20 Biko (2004 [1978], p. 112).
- 21 Biko (2004 [1978], p. 83).
- 22 Lembede (1946); see also Fatton (1986).
- 23 Biko (2004 [1978], p. 111).
- 24 Biko (2004 [1978], p. 74).
- 25 Lembede (1946).
- 26 There is some evidence that Biko regarded Black Consciousness to be the “true liberalism,” eventually attaining a fully integrated non-racial synthesis (Cf. Magaziner 2010, p. 42).
- 27 SASO (September 1970, p. 2).
- 28 SASO (September 1970, p. 2).
- 29 In the recent literature, this is often treated using the “grounding” relation. (See Rosen 2010; Fine 2012.)
- 30 In speaking of “because,” it is critical to note that some becauses and explanations are metaphysical, and some are causal. The fact *John is an unmarried man* does not cause John to be a bachelor. The word “because” in the above paragraph indicates a metaphysical connection—a connection between the nature of bachelorhood and the nature of unmarried-man-hood—not a causal one. Contrast this with the sentence “John is a bachelor because he made a firm decision never to get married.” In that sentence, the word “because” indicates a causal explanation.
- 31 I discuss this distinction in Epstein (2015, 2016).

- 32 Xolela Mangcu (*City Press*, 5-Jul-2015).
- 33 Exactly how this point goes may actually depend on which South African laws we consider, as they do not all define the legal categories equivalently. The “general acceptance” condition in the Population Registration Act of 1950, for instance, might rule out the possibility of “passing.” The overall point, however, is that while Biko rules out skin color as a criterion for blackness, it nonetheless enters the definition by the inclusion of discrimination according to the law, which is at least in part done on the basis of skin color.
- 34 Sartre (1948).
- 35 I am grateful to George Hull for extensive discussion and for stimulating many of the ideas explored in this chapter. I also am grateful to audiences at the University of Cape Town, especially Danwood Chirwa, Bernhard Weiss, and Josh Davis, and at the University of Oslo.

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