

Black and White Symbolical Implications of an Aesthetical Polarization¹

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*"Why do you call yourself 'black', you are more brown, isn't it?"
"Why do you call yourself 'white'? You are more pink..."²*

Abstract

This paper attempts to show that the aesthetic opposition of black and white as aesthetic perceptible "colours" applied to the description of the density of human skin pigment (as it is still done, for example, in southern Africa) does not reflect aesthetic reality. To make its case, the paper argues that human beings are not simply black or white in skin colour; this categorisation is not precise, because the black and white scheme is a simplifying reductionism. Besides being a simplification and reductionism, the application of this colour scheme to humans is also wrong, because from the perspective of human perception black and white "colours" are opposites or extremes, while humans with contrasting skin pigmentations are by no means necessarily opposites or extremes. Another argument advanced in the paper is that this aesthetic opposition may lead to an anthropological extremism and thus to an ethical problem. The paper concludes with two normative suggestions, namely that the black and white scheme should be replaced with a non-binary scheme and that an individual should not be signified by her/his skin colour alone.

Introduction

Those who have travelled to a substantial number of countries will have noticed that – in reality, not on black and white prints – they very seldom saw a completely black or white person. Of course we immediately *know* what we mean by talking of black and white people. These labels help to distinguish one from another. But they are wrong – at least, if seen from an *aesthetical* point of view.

Using critical thinking and phenomenology as its methods of approach to the topic in question, this paper will attempt to show that aesthetic perceptible "colours" applied to the description of the density of human skin pigment (as it is still done, for example, in southern Africa) does not reflect aesthetic reality. To drive its point home, the paper will argue that human beings are not simply black or white in skin colour; this categorisation is not precise, because the black and white scheme is a simplifying reductionism. It will further argue that besides being a simplification and reductionism, the *application* of this colour scheme to humans is also wrong, because from the perspective of human perception, black and white "colours" are *opposites* or *extremes*, while humans with

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contrasting skin pigmentations are by no means necessarily opposites or extremes. After having shown the unacceptability of the application of the black and white scheme to humans from the aesthetic point of view, the paper will go on to show that this aesthetic opposition may lead to an anthropological extremism and thus to an ethical problem.

Where "Black" and "White" People are Real Opposites or Extremes

Economic Difference – e.g. in South Africa

The ethical impact of the aesthetical black-white polarisation – implemented and abused by the colonial powers– could be seen for example in the Apartheid Era in South Africa and can still be seen today. One does not need in-depth knowledge of statistical figures to determine that in South Africa most of the so-called white people are not poor and the majority of black people are not rich. Driving through South African cities one immediately will be aware that a white person in a township is an exception and very probably a visitor or an aid worker; and a black person in an upmarket residential area is only sometimes a home-owner in that particular area. The so-called black and white people in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) are statistically and aggregately seen very clear economical opposites, the economical "colour divide" is obvious – that is without doubt. Apartheid ended on paper, but not at all entirely in reality: economically and socially the two groups are still "apart" from each other and a situation in which some swim in pools and some others do not have clean drinking water within one nation-state cannot be maintained for a longer period. The crime rate in South Africa is significantly high, especially in some areas of Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town, and if we know the reasons we can understand why it is that high: hungry beings are angry beings... A smart and careful redistribution of higher – respectively highest – incomes seems to be one viable and – according to my judgement – vital economic-political instrument. But one can hope that the recent economical and political history of Zimbabwe is only a *negative* example. Observing South Africa from an "outside"³ perspective, I doubt if the measures undertaken are drastic enough to reduce hunger and anger significantly. But it is also clear that efforts from all sides have to be undertaken to change the current situation, which also includes a re-reflection of an attitude according to which the state must cater for everything. However these economical, social and political problems are not the issue in my paper and are reflected elsewhere⁴, although I want to make it clear that I am aware of these harsh differences along the economical colour divide.

Skin Pigmentation Difference

I will here not concentrate on contemporary African philosophers' criticism of modern Western philosophers' approaches to race and colour but on recent anthropological and biological findings on the issue in question. An approach from an African aesthetical perspective on the issue in question is still outstanding. The African philosophers' criticisms, however, are interesting since they trace the roots of the idea of white supremacy in modern Western philosophy.⁵

Biologically seen, dark and light skins are extremes in terms of sunlight absorption. One popular anthropological theory⁶ explains the reason of different intensity of skin pigmentation – due to the pigment *melanin*⁷ – in terms of a sunlight filter comparable to sunglasses: the darker the skin (or the sunglass) the more light will be filtered out, and the

less light can enter the body; the lighter the skin the less light will be filtered out, the more light being able to enter the body. This explanation also sheds light on a different question, namely why lighter skin tans due to sunlight exposure: the more light skin is exposed to sunlight the darker the skin tans.⁸

The theory also explains why people with more intense skin pigmentation – for example, indigenous Africans or Indians – "originally" are found closer to the equator while those with less intense skin pigmentation live closer to the poles (higher UV intensity is responsible for higher vitamin D synthesis)⁹; there is a clear correlation of sunlight (UV) exposure in certain geographical areas and the skin pigmentation (melanin density) of the indigenous population living in those areas ("GLOGER-rule").¹⁰ Unfortunately this theory of skin pigment intensity does not explain the different shades of *colours* in the skin of people living in different parts of the world.¹¹

Colour Facts – Black & White as Opposites and Extremes

In aesthetics, and especially here, a specific African perspective is a desideratum and thus such an approach is highly desirable – black and white "colours" give us particular problems because they are considered as special or even "unreal" colours. Black and white – but also grey and neutral – are often called "achromatic" colours. The Greek word *chroma* [gen. *chromatos*] means colour, the prefix "a" – an *alpha privativum* – negates the following word: *chroma*; thus black and white are "non-colour-colours" – that does not help *prima facie*, but seen in relation to the colour spectrum in which for the most human beings¹² the three perceived primary colour pigments¹³ form all other *chromatic colours*¹⁴ ("colour-colours"), black and white are so to speak "off limits": they do not appear in the spectral wheel as well as all other colour mixtures which need black or white pigments as elements, such as pink (red and white) or dark blue (blue and black).

If it comes to mixtures of colourful light or light colours (according to the additive colour theory), the basic colours are red, blue, and green. These light-colours can produce so-called "white light", which is a mixture of the three basic light colours (red, blue, green). On a TV or computer screen all colours are produced in that way: the mixture of all colours gives the observer the impression of "white" (which is not a real white), the absence of all colours gives her a black screen (no light colour at all is emitted). Black and white here can be considered as opposites or extremes, because black is what we see in the absence of light, white is what we see on such a screen if all three basic colours are emitted equally. In other words, the activeness of the three basic light colours produces "white light", the passiveness darkness or "black". A room completely painted in white reflects and one in black absorbs light.

If we observe black and white objects exposed to sunlight (think of cars, for example) a black object of a certain physical structure (surface, size, form etc.) absorbs more sun and gets warmer than a white object of the same physical structure. In terms of the ability of light and heat absorption black and white are *extremes* and *opposites*.

Imprecise Application of Colours Schemas to Humans

In the light of the above-mentioned aspects of certain colour theories and perceptions a number of applications of colour schemes to humans appear to be imprecise.

A symbolically valuable but imprecise application of a colour schema to humans is the notion of the "rainbow nation". The notion was used by Nelson MANDELA in a symbolic and normative way: the different ethnic groups in South Africa should be brought together harmoniously in the same way as the colour harmony in a rainbow could be observed. Between the colours of the rainbow there is no clear line of demarcation, rather a borderless flow from one colour into the other. Additionally, depending on the individual perception, the colours of the rainbow are more or less equally distributed in that phenomenon. Therefore the notion is a useful and powerful symbol and I do not want to analyze this implicit political and social intention which is doubtless still one of the most important political tasks in South Africa, namely to bring people of different origin, ethnic groups, skin pigmentation and so forth together in such a way that the members of a culturally heterogeneous society harmoniously live their lives, respecting each others' cultural and biological differences and sharing resources in a just manner.¹⁵

But when it comes to the application of the colours of the rainbow to humans themselves the symbol fails to be a precise and correct one: the rainbow has no black and white components but red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple ones. The so-called black and white people do not find their skin colour represented in the colours of the rainbow. Even a slightly more adequate colour description for black and white skin, like for example the colours brown and beige-rosé, do not describe colours which can be found in the rainbow. Neither the majority of South Africans are represented in that symbol nor minorities such as Indians and the so-called "whites".

But a paradoxical and somewhat ironic aspect is that the colour of skin after a particular "skin treatment" – which intends to give the skin colour a shade of the "perceived opposite" – is indeed very close to colours which can be perceived in the rainbow. I'm talking about the colours red and purple. Of course nobody exists with perfect red and purple skin pigments, but there is an intention of some individuals with "white" skin to have a darker tint with the help of (sun)light (UV) exposure, that can give the skin a red shade due to over-exposure to sunlight, and that disappears some days after the exposure. On the other hand some individuals with "black" skin used a particular cream that contains hydroquinone and makes dark skin lighter. Some of those creams unfortunately gave brown skin a different shade: *"From yellow, the skin would turn reddish, then blue and lastly purple"*.¹⁶

There is a lot to say about the aesthetisation (beautification) and the melioration (improvement) of our perceived appearance in general and on the intention of human beings to imitate the perceived "better ones" in particular, which I called *imitatio prominentis*¹⁷ parallelized to Mircea ELIADE'S *imitatio dei*.¹⁸ But this trend – that some white people want to be darker and that some black people want to be lighter – must be seen in the context of the imitation of the perceived better ones, the *imitatio prominentis*, because many of those celebrities who are aesthetic examples for masses of people can – aesthetically seen – not be put into either the white or black extreme corner. On the one hand these models are positive symbols for the aesthetical merger of diverse ethnic groups; on the other hand, many people think that they have to imitate these prominent figures by all means, for example, by sun-tanning the skin or by applying skin-lightening creams.

The aesthetic ideal of skin colour – of prominent figures and thus of many other people – lies between so-called black and white skin. This leads us to another inadequacy

of this black and white colour schema: the skin colour of "coloureds" is, of course, not, for example, a lighter or darker grey, which would be the colour we expect if we mix black and white, but a certain shade of brown, some darker, some lighter with many differences in implicit colour nuances. So, from the aesthetical point of view of the painter, the mixture of brown and beige-rosé colour pigments is not too far away from the skin colour of so-called coloureds, at least it is closer to the appearance of their skin colour than grey.

Furthermore the political terms "black African", "black American", "African American", "white African" give us again a cluster of particular imprecise descriptions. Consider the following examples from the *aesthetical* point of view: as we all know, some people all over the world, for example many Tamils in Tamil Nadu in India or in Sri Lanka, have relatively dark-brown nearly "black" skin pigmentation. In our globalized world quite often people do not live where they and their ancestor were born. Thus from the aesthetical point view a member of the ethnic group of Tamils born in Africa, and living in Africa should be a black African; the same person living in the USA should be a black American. A white South African living in the USA should be an African American and an albino, for example Xhosa, Zulu or Mosotho, a "white African". This, of course, is entirely contrary to the general use of such terms.

Symbolical Implications of the Black and White Polarisation and an Aesthetical Alternative

As we can see from the approach taken above the black and white schema is imprecise because so-called black or white people are not really and entirely black or white, but darker or lighter *brown* and white ones are not really white, but rather lighter or darker *beige-rosé*. Brown and beige-rosé are not *opposites* or *extremes* like black and white – this is one of my main points. Black and white *colours* are extremes and opposites, but so-called black and white *people* are by no means opposites, but could be considered as extremes in terms of skin pigmentation: very dark skin has very dense skin pigmentation, while light skin has very little pigmentation. On the same basis tall and small people could be considered as extremes, people with blue and brown eyes, those with big and small noses or ears, lighter and darker hair and so forth... so we would not talk about blacks and whites, but about tall and smalls, browns, blues and greens. Because if you can signify a person by its skin colour *alone*, why should it be not possible to signify a person in the same way by body height or eye colour?

But how does that categorisation help and why do we use it? Do we really want to signify and categorize human beings by colours and measures? Before I come back to that question later on – where I will plead to be a bit more "Platonic" – I want to consider the symbolical implications of the achromatic black and white opposition.

Black and white "*colours*" are opposing extremes – black and white *people* are not, but the usage of the terms black and white and its opposing implications suggests that everything that *is* black or white must somehow be one part of an opposing extreme! Additionally in many cases (again we additionally need a specific African perspective to complement the picture), black is the negative side of the two extremes, while white is seldom connoted negatively.

Let's have a look at some examples. I begin with sheep: if someone would like to knit a black woollen pullover, the easiest thing would be to use the wool of a black sheep. But black wool from black sheep is rare. Black wool from white sheep is not rare because white sheep are not rare. The problem again is colour: White wool can be dyed in many colours, black wool not. This is the reason why black sheep were sorted out from the flocks so that they don't reproduce themselves and don't mix with others. This is exactly where the saying "black sheep" – a morally negative connotation – comes from. A *black* sheep is a *bad* sheep; only a white sheep is a good one, because its wool can be dyed in diverse colours – even in black. The saddest and most sadistic chapters in history are those where such categorisations and "out-sortings" were applied to humans. Coming back to the sheep thus the two opposite colours of the wool have opposite connotations: good and bad.

Another example comes from economics: A place – real or virtual – where sellers and buyers meet to exchange goods legally against money is called "market" (or white market, if contrasted from the illegal counterpart). A place where the same thing takes place *illegally* is called "black market". The implication in that case is that such illegal business is made in "dark corners" – real or virtual – where the market participants cannot be easily seen and detected; "black" in the term "black market" signifies the *darkness* of such a place where the illegal transfer can take place – thus *black* means *illegal*. Again there is a clear (moral) dichotomy of two extremes – legal and illegal market – which is symbolized by two colours; again, black symbolizes the negative part of the dichotomy.¹⁹

Black often is used as a symbol of death, this can be seen by mourning clothes and black bands which indicate the mourning of a person; white often is a symbol for (new) life symbolized for example through the white christening robe. Of course death is here negatively connoted, white positively. At weddings in many countries women wear white and men black clothes. In that particular case there is no negative connotation of a particular colour, but white and black are symbols for *opposites* in sex. The same applies to black and white as symbols for night and day, which are not necessarily negatively or positively connoted, although "day" might be more positively connoted than "night", but again it is a dichotomy, like the colours of the two groups of playing figures and the squares of the chess board. Here black and white do not only display opposites but antagonists and enemies.²⁰

With these examples I wanted to show that *black* "colour" – not exclusively, but quite often – symbolizes the *negative* side of two extremes while white stands for the positive aspect. And – this is already included in the former argument – black and white symbolize very often two *extremes* which normally *exclude* each other (day–night; life–death; male–female). The effect of these symbolical implications of the two colours is that we think about opposites, dichotomies, extremes and antagonisms if we talk of black and white, and this engram of polarity cannot be erased easily.

It is essential to note that research has to be undertaken which analysis colour from a pre-colonial African aesthetic perspective. Here it would be necessary to find out if black and white hues were as well seen as extremes and opposites and which symbolical meanings they had or still have.

Not Colour, but Culture

From an aesthetical point of view "brown" and "beige-rosé" are more adequate colour descriptions for the skin of so-called "black" and "white" people than the labels "black" and "white". Beige-rosé and brown are neither aesthetic extremes nor are they part of an aesthetical polarisation. Nevertheless individuals should not be named "brown" or "beige-rosé" *people*, because *skin* is only the "wrapping" of the body, although it covers the surface of the entire human being. Individuals should not be signified by their skin colour alone, even if the skin is the largest surface²¹ which can be seen of an individual.²² We do not signify individuals by eye colour, but sometimes by hair colour and use descriptions like she *is* blonde/fair or he *is* grey. Grey does not have a racial implication because elderly people in many racial groups have grey hair, while blonde/fair limits the possibilities of racial groups under which such an individual could be subsumed (exceptions are albinos). But in both cases I would suggest not to signify an individual by a colour *alone*, because this kind of reductionism omits too many elements of a person and her/his personality.

In the light of the above, my normative suggestions are (1) to abandon the term "white" for descriptions of individuals – because nobody's skin is really and entirely white – and apply the term "black" only for those skin colour which is really black, but not (dark) brown. I also would like to suggest (2) to abandon the signification of a human being by colour *alone* – irrespectively if skin, hair or eye colour – because that reductionism and oversimplification omits various other important innate or socio-cultural aspects which are more important in the context of solving problems in daily life. Thus one should *not* say "She *is* black or white", but "The colour of her skin is (dark or light) brown or beige-rosé". In that way we would not talk about the *entire person*, but about her/his surface; our words describe something superficial with a "superficial" term. If we say "S/he *is* black" we use a term which is meant to describe a surface, but we signify the *whole* human being or maybe even the *essence* of the being.

I want to support my arguments additionally with a not very analytical but romantic and maybe even sentimental statement in SAINT-EXUPÉRY'S *Little Prince*, namely that one in which the little prince says '*only the heart can perceive in a good way, but for the eyes the essence is invisible*'²³ and the heart does not detect colours, but it detects other aspects of human personality and character. Very often the messages of tales meant for children are close to important philosophical concepts. PLATO lets SOCRATES explain in the Dialog *Phaidon* that the real philosopher does not care about the body, but about the soul or we could say about the essence of a being.²⁴ I am not a Platonist and I do not want to support PLATO'S idealism, reductionism, intellectualism and body-negativity, but according to my personal observations and experience the main differences we observe in our daily lives between ethnic groups in values and life conceptions, attitude and behaviour are not due to colour (race), but due to culture (ethnicity), and in that light a few steps on the path between biological essentialists and social constructionists should be taken in the direction of the latter.

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² Fragment of a conversation between Steve BIKO and a Judge during the Apartheid era in South Africa according to Donald Woods' Novel *Biko*.

³ The developing country Lesotho is landlocked by the RSA and is of course influenced by economical and political developments in the RSA.

⁴ e.g. APPIAH & GUTMANN 1996; EZE 1997; MARX 1998; COETZEE & ROUX 1998; GOLDBERG & SOLOMOS 2002;

⁵ compare for example EZE criticism of KANT: EZE 1998, 103-140

⁶ KNUSSMANN 1996, 7, 84, 321, 410, 416-7, 457

⁷ *melas* (Greek): black

⁸ KNUSSMANN 1996, 416-417

⁹ KNUSSMANN 1996, 416-417

¹⁰ KNUSSMANN 1996, 416

¹¹ KNUSSMANN 1996, 417

¹² The human being usually by nature is a trichromat: the eye's retina has three colour preceptors, which is the reason why humans perceive colours as a mixture of three basic colours.

¹³ Traditionally: blue, red, yellow; or according to subtractive colour theory: cyan, magenta, yellow.

¹⁴ Traditionally: i.e. green, orange, purple; or according to subtractive colour theory: blue, red, green etc.

¹⁵ Of course therefore the sources and resources have to be re-distributed through carefully planned and managed socio-economic transformation. This is not a completely impossible task, but a complicated and delicate one and not the topic of this paper. On the difference of the terms "culturally heterogeneous" and "multicultural" compare BOHLKEN 2002 and 2003.

¹⁶ RIBANE 2006

¹⁷ MEINHOLD 2005

¹⁸ *Imitatio dei* seems to be a sub-phenomenon of *imitatio prominentis*.

¹⁹ Of course there is also a grey market which is neither completely legal nor illegal – but so-called grey market air tickets are sold at the "white market".

²⁰ Although lies are something negative from the moral point of view, a "white lie" is not as negatively connoted as an "ordinary" lie.

²¹ The surface of the skin is between 1.5 and 1.8 square meters (KUNSCH 2000).

²² I mean aspects which are innate parts of the individual, not aspects that could be easily exchanged like clothes.

²³ Free quotation from the German translation (SAINT-EXUPÉRY 1984, 74)

²⁴ PLATON *Phaidon* 64 d-e