



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Theology, Racial Privilege, and the Practice of Resistance*

Michael L. Raposa
mlr0@lehigh.edu

I

In 2006, the philosopher Shannon Sullivan published her important book on *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*.¹ In addition to critical race theory and feminist thought, Sullivan drew on the resources supplied by American pragmatic philosophy

* I owe a debt of gratitude to Darius Callier, Elizabeth Raposa and, most especially Lee H. Butler, Jr., for their thoughtful and challenging comments about an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006). (Further references to this book will be made with page numbers, parenthetically, in the body of my essay.)

and psychoanalytic theory for the development of her rich and persuasive argument. In this paper, I propose to extend that argument in a number of potentially useful ways.

I am impressed by the success of Sullivan's account in showing how white privilege operates as a complex set of largely unconscious habits, subtly but powerfully shaping human thoughts, feelings, perceptions and practices. Within American pragmatism, John Dewey and W.E.B. Du Bois are the primary sources for her insights concerning the dynamics of habit formation and dissolution. I contend that additional, important insights can be gleaned from a closer examination of the pragmatic philosophies of Charles Peirce and William James (both of whom receive relatively superficial treatment in Sullivan's study). In particular, Peirce's occasional but illuminating reflections on self-control and James's analysis of the relationship between attention and habit are especially crucial to *my* account (although the latter receives only a mention here). Furthermore, I want to supplement Sullivan's appeal to psychoanalytic theory with a discussion of how some of the basic principles of cognitive therapy might be brought to bear on the tasks of facilitating awareness of white privilege and of developing strategies for the resistance of racism.

In the first place, then, I propose to extend Sullivan's argument by bringing additional intellectual resources into play toward the end of supporting its general conclusions. (I am largely in agreement with those conclusions, although the broader theoretical framework that I intend to establish will also suggest ways in which they might be usefully modified.) At the same time I want to draw on those resources—and on her argument—for specific theological purposes, in order to address several important theological questions. How do certain insidious habits, like

those that shape white privilege and fuel racism, tend to infect our theological practices? What tools do philosophical pragmatism and psychotherapy offer to the theologian struggling to prevent such an infection, to eliminate it or at least to neutralize its most damaging effects? Moreover, and more generally, what tools do they supply for helping us to understand the relationship between our theology and our ongoing spiritual practices? How do they enable us to conceive of theology itself as always already a form of praxis. Of course, the detailed exploration of answers to these latter questions represents a massive undertaking. Here I intend only to broach them, to identify directions for future inquiry that this admittedly limited study of racism and white privilege might suggest or portend.

I should add a word about those limitations. This essay originated as an extended meditation on Sullivan's book, on the thinkers with whom she was engaged and with others whose perspectives I felt were complementary (and also with which I am comfortably familiar, since I am primarily a student of American pragmatism). But our treatment (Sullivan's and mine) of even these selected individuals is far from adequate. For example, I do not intend to suggest that Du Bois' value for understanding race, racism and white privilege is *in any way* limited to those respects in which he is dependent as a thinker on white theorists like James and Freud. Moreover, I recognize that the issues raised here have been treated with great sophistication and insight by generations of black liberation theologians, indeed, that there are invaluable African American Catholic resources (crucial given my location/perspective as a white American Catholic) that could be brought to bear on them. This exercise serves as a prolegomenon to that much larger task, to the future development of whatever fragmentary insights can be gleaned

here within the edifying framework supplied by twentieth and twenty first century liberation theology.

II

Since my primary purpose is to extend Sullivan's argument, using it as a starting point and stimulus for my own deliberations, I intend to offer only a brief summary of what she accomplishes in *Revealing Whiteness*, in no sense pretending to confuse my treatment here with the careful, critical scrutiny that this book deserves. Building on her earlier work in feminist philosophy, Sullivan turned to an investigation of racism, in part, "to understand what it is like to be the one with relative privilege addressed (sometimes angrily, often critically) by those who suffer because of that privilege;" consequently, her analysis was at least "initially motivated . . . by feminist concerns to better understand both ends of the oppressor-oppressed pole" (11). While this motivation supplies the rationale for her account of racism, both the philosophy of pragmatism and psychoanalytic theory combine to contribute the ingredients of her complex and sophisticated methodological approach to the topic.

This is a combination of elements that, by Sullivan's own admission, will strike some of her readers as counter-intuitive. "Pragmatism has a reputation for being levelheaded and down-to-earth, occupying itself with the practical and the familiar, while psychoanalysis is often seen as more extravagant and excessive, dealing with the uncanny and the unspeakable" (45). Without denying the tension that exists between these general perspectives, Sullivan dismisses any conflict or even sharp contrast between them—including that expressed in the characterization above—as the distorted result of caricature. Her approach follows the important precedent

established by W.E.B. Du Bois early in the twentieth century, when he blended effectively (especially in writings published after 1930) a classical pragmatist perspective with elements of Freudian psychoanalysis (21). Whether her insight was inspired or confirmed by that precedent, clearly these are the theoretical resources that Sullivan discovered to be most felicitous for understanding racism and white privilege as phenomena fueled predominantly by powerful *unconscious habits*, both personal and social habits.

Sullivan begins her book with a careful statement of the multiple advantages of conceiving of racial privilege as consisting in unconscious habit, a set of claims for which the rest of her discussion provides an elaborate argument (3-4). This strategy allows her, first of all, to avoid any sort of problematic “mind-body dualisms.” From the perspective that she develops, habit can only be adequately understood as a phenomenon that is *both* thoroughly psychical *and* somatic; that is to say, racism cannot be reduced to its manifestation in the form of distinctive mental attitudes, but is also always *embodied*, so that it shapes bodily dispositions and is displayed in specific types of physical demeanor and behavior.

Since the self is essentially a cluster of habits on Sullivan’s pragmatic account, the being of the self must be conceived in a thoroughly contextual and historical manner. This historicized ontology accomplishes two things for her argument, allowing her to claim that human beings are really and unavoidably raced and racist, without having to deny that this is a result that has been shaped (and continues to be shaped) by complex social, political, cultural and economic factors. Racism’s “weighty history does not mean that it is set in stone.” Moreover, since habits are constitutive of the self, yet represent adaptations to selected features of the environment,

attention to habit allows her to “locate” racism simultaneously within and beyond the self. This double focus not only facilitates the task of understanding how person’s become “invested” in racist environments and institutions, but also suggests strategies that they might adopt in order to resist such attachments to/investments in structures of privilege.

Finally, Sullivan’s portrayal of white privilege as consisting largely in a set of unconscious habits helps to explain its frequently insidious quality, its “invisibility,” and so also the regularity with which persons who are significantly shaped by such habits are nevertheless inclined to deny their presence or ignore their effects. Ever since Peirce, pragmatists have argued for the acute fallibility of introspection; if possible at all, introspection must take the form of inferences or judgments about the self, inferences shaped by multiple habits of thought and feeling and thus always potentially flawed (since such habits might preclude rather than generate insight in any given case).² Indeed, these judgments are often problematic enough that we sometimes rely on others to correct them from a third person perspective.

If “ought implies can” then an assertion about the unconscious or “invisible” quality of racism might appear to relieve a person of any real responsibility for his/her racist condition. If one is completely unaware of being in such a condition, pronounces with sincerity the inconsistency between racism and those values that one consciously affirms, furthermore, if the actual truth about one’s unconscious status can only be revealed as a result of pragmatic and/or psychoanalytic scrutiny, then surely the discussion of racism has been removed altogether from

² Peirce denied our capacity for at least a Cartesian form of introspection in some articles published early in his career. See in Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. C. Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and A. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935, 1958), 5.213-317 (read as “volume 5, paragraphs 213 to 317”).

the realm of moral discourse. Sullivan traces such a line of reasoning but vigorously rejects it. Not only do we bear some responsibility for our racism but we are surely accountable for choosing to persist in that condition. Eschewing any species of what she labels as the “liberal” approach to this issue, Sullivan refuses to reduce racism, even in its mildest forms, to a kind of accidental ignorance that can be eliminated through proper education (so that if white people could just be “exposed” to and learn more about black people, then their prejudices would dissolve). Early on, Du Bois adopted such a liberal point of view, but he came eventually to realize that “the ignorance manifested by white people was much more complex and sinister.” Indeed, “it was an active, deliberate achievement that was carefully (though not necessarily consciously) constructed, maintained and protected” (20)

It was a combining of Freud’s theory of the unconscious with a “thick” pragmatic understanding of habit—the latter, Sullivan suggests, most likely originating with Du Bois’ reading of William James’s *The Principles of Psychology*—that facilitated this shift in perspective, once again, readily visible in writings that Du Bois published after 1930.³ These theoretical insights do not appear as unmodified in Du Bois’ account. In the first place he moved beyond Freud’s emphasis on the Oedipal nuclear family in order to gauge the impact of broader social, political and economic forces shaping the self’s unconscious. At the same time, Du Bois was much more sensitive than the classical pragmatists to strategies employed by the human psyche in order to repress or resist changes in habit (here Freud’s influence is apparent). Nevertheless, Sullivan concludes that the development of a full-blown model for understanding

³ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950); see Sullivan, pp. 21-23

racism in terms of the operation of complex, unconscious habits of oppression “remains only a tantalizing suggestion in his work” (23).

Sullivan herself appeals primarily not to James but to John Dewey’s pragmatic conception of habit (articulated in a number of writings, but most thoroughly in his *Human Nature and Conduct*), preferring Dewey to James for her purposes not only because of the latter’s troubling “individualism,” but also because of his socially conservative portrayal of habits as resistant to change and as helpful in securing class boundaries.⁴ At the same time, Dewey’s philosophy is hardly unproblematic in her view, plagued on this issue by his tendency to reduce “racial prejudice to an epiphenomenon of class and economic and political tensions” (33). Dewey’s otherwise nuanced perspective seems, for Sullivan, to be somewhat blind to “the ugly hostility of human habit,” thus also to “the vicious realities of white privilege” (43). Notwithstanding, Dewey correctly understood that our habits are developed as a result of complex “transactions” that occur between the self and both its natural and social environments, thus facilitating Sullivan’s own conclusion that “white privilege is best understood as a constellation of psychical and somatic habits formed through transaction with a racist world” (63). Once again, the operation of these habits is largely unconscious, “seemingly invisible,” and buttressed by mechanisms designed actively to resist any conscious attempts to expose them.

The positing of such mechanisms of repression/resistance indicates Sullivan’s indebtedness to psychoanalysis rather than to pragmatism. While Du Bois exploited but also

⁴ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988); see Sullivan, p. 37 and note #3 on p. 206

significantly modified some of Freud's ideas, Sullivan's critique of Freud is much more pointed and extensive. Freud's "atomistic individualism," that is, his tendency to isolate the self within the confines of the nuclear family but otherwise to leave it "sealed off from the larger social world that it inhabits" is especially problematic (47). So, too, is Freud's gross oversimplification of a complex variety of human impulses and desires as being essentially sexual in nature. It is also the case that Freud's psychoanalytic technique represents for Sullivan the attempt to "effect mental change by means of psychological manipulation only," without sufficient attention being paid to human beings as a psychosomatic unity, to their habits as being thoroughly embodied and so both displayed in and affected by one's "bodily comportment" (46).

None of these critical reservations serves to undermine Freud's significance as a great pioneer in the modern exploration of the unconscious mind. Nevertheless, it is to the theoretical speculations of the French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche, that Sullivan turns in order to understand the peculiar dynamics of racism and white privilege. Laplanche properly historicized Freud's account, avoided adopting the latter's individualism, while also productively transforming and extending Freud's theory of seduction in a manner that makes it especially useful for Sullivan's philosophical purposes. A more complicated picture of the "transactional unconscious" (i.e., more complicated than either the atomistic Freudian account or other perspectives that probe no more deeply than the subconscious mind) is sketched by Sullivan as a result of her creative interpretation of Laplanche.

Indeed, this picture is sufficiently complicated that it is difficult to know how one might begin to test its accuracy. Sullivan extends Laplanche's rather speculative theories about how

“unconscious messages about sexuality and sexual pleasure are communicated from mother to child” (e.g., through the act of breast-feeding) into even more deeply speculative territory (70-74). She focuses her attention on the regular activity of cleaning an infant’s body. Within an historical context shaped by obsessive concerns about maintaining the racial purity of “whiteness.” she argues that such cleanliness becomes “a crucial mechanism by which unconscious racial habits are formed.” No matter how unintentional this result may be in the conscious mind of the adult caregiver, “messages about race are transmitted to a baby through the process of cleaning it.”

While it is certainly plausible that “the adult world is sending messages to children all the time that they cannot understand,” it is unclear at what point the semiotic context for such a transaction would be sufficiently well developed to cause a child “to introject messages about the purity of whiteness and the abjection of blackness.” Despite all of her efforts to maintain a healthy critical distance from Freud’s account, Sullivan’s speculations seem unnecessarily “Freudian” at this juncture, awarding without real argument a certain primacy to infantile experiences in the development of powerful (and at least initially somatic) racist habits. That Freudian bias does not seem to be an essential precondition for her claims that such habits are inherited by children at a relatively early stage of development as a result of transactions with their environment, moreover, that they are unconscious, thus deeply engrained in mind and body.

However deeply entrenched and unconscious these habits may be, we do remain responsible for them, most especially for transforming them. Sullivan judges Dewey to have been insufficiently impressed by how nasty such habits can be in their nature and effects; she

worries that James's account leaves habit too "resistant to change." Yet she is clearly moved by the general spirit of pragmatism when she urges the critical analysis of those habits that are constitutive of the self and the creative development of strategies for strengthening, modifying or dissolving them in light of one's interests, values and purposes. A concern for justice combined with recognition of the oppressive consequences of racism mark our attention to habits of white privilege as morally obligatory. "If people cannot be held wholly responsible for their unconscious habits, they can be held accountable for their attempts (or lack thereof) to transform them"(90). Since habits are formed through our continuous transaction with environmental factors, the key to combating racism lies in addressing those factors that are crucial to its development. "In this way, environmental change might be thought of as the equivalent of psychotherapy for a transactional unconscious"(91). This is a tricky business, as the arguments and examples in the second half of Sullivan's book will make especially clear, a tragically constrained process for which no perfectly successful outcome can be anticipated. But the critical tools supplied by pragmatism and psychoanalysis best enable us to assess the limits of this process of self-transformation, and to pursue it aggressively while avoiding the traps laid by an unconscious psyche that will prove to be forcefully resistant to change.

III

One of the pragmatic resources that Sullivan might have taken better advantage of in her attempts to understand the logic of self transformation conceived as habit change is available in remarks scattered throughout the philosophical writings of Charles S. Peirce; most salient among these are comments concerning the nature and purpose of "self control," both a logical and a

moral concept for Peirce that he regarded as being of extraordinary significance. He portrayed it as a “capacity for rising to an extended view of a subject instead of seeing only temporary urgency. This is the only freedom” Peirce insisted, “of which man (*sic*) has any reason to be proud.”⁵ It is through the repeated exercise of such freedom that the self is both constituted and continuously transformed, or, as Peirce expressed it, “it is by the indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control that the *vir* is begotten.”⁶ On his account, this is all a matter of deliberately forming habits, subjecting them to criticism, then subsequently strengthening, modifying, dissolving or replacing them.

I have analyzed that account elsewhere at considerable length, but my purpose here requires only a brief summary of earlier inquiries.⁷ Self control is not for Peirce primarily a matter of strenuously exercising one’s volition “on the spot” in order to resist a temptation or to engage in a difficult task. It is not a wrestling match between isolated aspects of the self—between one’s “higher” and “lower” nature, whether this be conceived (psychologically) as a struggle between “superego” and “id” or (theologically) as a contest between “spirit” and “flesh.” While one might surely experience the self in the present moment as divided, self control as the exercise of one’s freedom is better conceived as something that occurs over time, wherein the present self enacts deliberate strategies intended to shape future versions of itself through a gradual process of habit formation.

⁵ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.339, note #1

⁶ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.402, note #2

⁷ In Raposa, “Self Control,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 21 (September 2000): 256-68; and in chapter 5 of *Meditation & the Martial Arts* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003)

This seems entirely consistent with Sullivan's analysis. Following Dewey, however, she focuses on strategies of environmental change. Since habit is always formed as a result of the organism's transactions with the environment, even subtle modifications of certain environmental structures can mark enormous progress toward the end of weakening or eliminating racist tendencies. By contrast, Peirce concluded that the achievement of self control most typically "results from training," moreover, that at a certain level of development "much or all of the training may be conducted in the imagination."⁸ These are not conflicting perspectives, it seems to me, but perfectly complementary. What Peirce's viewpoint illuminates is the special role that certain spiritual exercises or meditative practices might play for the theologian committed to the process of working to eradicate unconscious habits of racial privilege. That very same theologian might and consistently should call for real political and social change, for the removal or transformation of oppressive structures of racial injustice. Once again, these are not mutually exclusive options.

Habits operate below the level of consciousness to the extent that they shape conduct at all, that is, to the extent that one is behaving "habitually." To act in a self-controlled or deliberate manner, for Peirce, meant to engage critical consciousness in the examination of our entrenched habits, to submit them to careful scrutiny, measuring them against certain values and ideals (adherence to which also takes the form of belief-habits that must themselves sometimes be scrutinized). This is a process of making conscious that which is habitually unconscious. On this issue, Sullivan may have failed to appreciate the very real tension that does exist between

⁸ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.533

pragmatism and psychoanalysis. From her thoroughly psychoanalytic perspective, *unconscious* habits are *deeply* so, thus not directly accessible—perhaps not completely accessible at all—to rational inspection and criticism. They *resist* the process of being brought out of darkness into light, and this resistance is more than a simple matter of the natural inertia that strongly established habits display as tendencies to act without reflection unless somehow impeded by circumstances that render such action difficult, impossible or ineffective.⁹ Like the other pragmatists, Peirce seems *not* to have embraced this type of Freudian unconscious, one shaped by dark and mysterious forces, displaying itself in certain feelings and behaviors, but not subject to a great deal of self-control. Questions remain about whether or not Peirce’s thought is altogether incompatible with such a theory of the unconscious.¹⁰ Similar questions might be raised about whether or not cognitive therapy, which is historically rooted in classical psychoanalysis, represents a theoretical model that no longer accommodates certain features of its predecessor. But the salient observation here is that a pragmatist and a psychoanalyst are likely not to be talking about quite the same thing when they each refer to “unconscious” habits of racial privilege.

⁹ I employ the metaphor describing the “darkness” of the unconscious because it is ubiquitous in the psychoanalytic literature, but I recognize that this way of speaking may itself be tinged with racism.

¹⁰ On numerous occasions, Robert Corrington has brilliantly probed, criticized, adapted, and extended Peirce’s ideas about the unconscious. See, especially, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also my review of the latter in *Modern Theology* 18 (April 2002): 302-04. Finally, consult the superb collection of essays published in *Peirce, Semiotics, and Psychoanalysis*, eds. J. Muller and J. Brent (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

Peirce did recognize that “the action of thought is all the time going on” and for him this was true “not merely in the part of consciousness which thrusts itself on the attention, and which is most under discipline, but also in its deeply shaded parts.” “How ‘deeply shaded’?” is the question here, a question about the extent to which the illuminating power of a disciplined attention can expose those aspects of the self. Peirce proceeded to describe “what constitutes the fixation of attention.” “Contemplation,” he explained, “consists in using our self-control to remove us from the forcible intrusion of other thoughts, and in considering the interesting bearings of what may lie hidden in the icon, so as to cause the subjective intensity of it to increase.”¹¹ This statement is an intriguing one, richly suggestive, although Peirce did not immediately proceed to articulate its multiple implications. The key to gaining access to what is “hidden” in consciousness is our self-controlled attention, what Peirce refers to here as “contemplation.” Given Peirce’s perspective on the nature and meaning of self-control, such contemplation cannot consist in merely taking one’s attention, at any given moment, and shining it, like one might turn a flashlight, on what presently seems shrouded in darkness. This “fixation of attention” results not from a single act, but rather, from a continuous practice or “training,” from a process of cultivating certain habits of attention. Moreover, that process is always already a type of *semiosis*, an ongoing interpretive activity; its goal is to reveal what lies “hidden in the icon.”

Here is another possible divergence from Sullivan’s point of view. Rejecting Lacan and following Laplanche, she contends that “the unconscious is not structured as a language or

¹¹ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 7.555

formed out of language” (85). While in a sense this is true for Peirce as well, nevertheless, since he believed that “all the world is perfused with signs if it does not consist exclusively of signs,” he seems committed to the notion that even the unconscious must be conceived as semiosis. For Peirce, it is a process of ongoing interpretation “all the way down,” even if we must always be careful to observe that he had a generously expanded sense of what it means to “give an interpretation” (so that meaning for Peirce could be embodied in patterns of feeling or in habits of conduct, and was not limited to expression in verbal formulas).

What more might Peirce have meant by “contemplation”? Early in her analysis, Sullivan, developing an insight from Irigaray, remarks that “Wonder is a kind of surprise felt in the face of the strange that lets its difference be without trying to assimilate it into something known, same, and familiar” (39). This insight resonates with Peirce’s portrayal of “musement,” in his 1908 “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” as a kind of disciplined yet highly playful form of meditation.¹² For Peirce, this was a practice of “being awake to what is about or within you,” an extraordinary openness to the elements of experience frequently resulting in the formation of new habits. But it was also a practice of “playing” with established belief-habits, even when such beliefs were not presently being challenged by something “surprising” in one’s experience, a capacity for generating “wonder” within the context of what could typically seem commonplace, perhaps in order to see what may lie “hidden in the icon.” This requires the cultivation also of a certain purposelessness or sense of detachment, the ability to rise above “temporary urgencies” in order to begin to formulate long term strategies for the self and for self-

¹² See Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6.452-91, and my commentary in the fifth chapter, entitled “Musement,” of *Peirce’s Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

transformation. Such a state of mind would seem an essential precondition for exposing and challenging racist attitudes that might otherwise remain invisible and so continue to function comfortably.

I can add only the briefest of observations here about William James, whose pragmatism differs considerably from Peirce's "pragmatism" in certain respects, but whose perspective on the issues presently being raised appears otherwise quite compatible with the latter. It is certainly true that some of James's remarks in his first major publication, *The Principles of Psychology*, seem hardly productive for present purposes. There, habit is prized as a "precious conservative agent", one that "saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor."¹³ Yet, it is also here that James distinguished between beings as "living" rather than dead in terms of their "plasticity," that is, their ability to modify habits as well as take on new ones. It is also here, in his chapter on attention, that James announced that "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind."¹⁴ This is a remarkable announcement in a number of ways. In the first place, it seems like it must surely be false if Sullivan is correct in arguing that unnoticed habits of racial privilege really do dramatically shape our unconscious minds and consequently our behavior as well. But it remains an unsettled question about how one should best characterize James's own theory of the unconscious, how "deeply shaded" he believed its nether regions actually to be, and how significantly his thinking about this topic may have evolved from the time that he published the *Principles* to the appearance of later writings (for example, his Gifford Lectures on religious experience, where a more expansive notion of the

¹³ James, *Principles*, volume 1, p. 121

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 402

unconscious seems to be operative). Equally remarkable, however, is the powerful sense of agency that such an announcement presupposes. Otherwise helpless to control one's fate, one is nevertheless free to control one's attention ; moreover, repeated acts of attention are directly constitutive of self, not only of the experiences that one will have but of the habits that one will form. Here James actually seems less conservative than Sullivan and more like a classical existentialist, at the very least as someone favorable impressed by the human capacity for freedom (as selective attention). But such isolated remarks need to be contextualized (the latter as well as the earlier one about habit), balanced against other claims, and interpreted in the light of all of James's published writings.

For James, attention “implies the withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.”¹⁵ So it requires a similar kind of detachment to that which Peirce regarded as being necessary in the exercise of self-control. Yet it is also the case that James conceived of attention not as a single phenomenon, but as taking multiple forms. Without being able to explore it here, I would like to offer the suggestion that James's account of “the varieties of attention”¹⁶ (some of them intensely active, but others quite passive), combined with his pragmatic theory of the self as a lively bundle of habits and his highly nuanced method of introspection—all supply valuable intellectual resources for the theologian concerned with understanding the dynamics of racism and our capacity to resist it. Passive attention is attention guided by habit, which can be manifested as effortless skill, or as deep absorption in some object of contemplation, but also as a blinding and poisonous prejudice. At the same time, our habits of

¹⁵ Ibid., 404

¹⁶ Ibid., 416 ff.

attention can themselves be actively attended to, brought into play and so questioned. This account should be further combined with James's idea of a "moral equivalent of war" in order to understand how the disciplined exercise of attention might be conceived as a form of meaningful spiritual exercise, not just for any purpose, but again, for purposes of resistance (because, as James himself insisted, there is a real "wrongness" in the world and we have a moral duty to resist it).¹⁷

IV

If psychoanalysis would appear, at least at first blush, to be an odd bedfellow for pragmatism, cognitive therapy seems made to order for the philosophical pragmatist looking to evaluate the psychological significance of certain basic insights and perspectives. While historically rooted in classical psychoanalysis, cognitive therapy originated in the 1960s, initially through the work of Aaron Beck, when he discovered in therapy sessions that certain thoughts, preconscious or at the fringe of consciousness, were not being properly articulated.¹⁸ These thoughts were found to be connected to troubling feelings and behaviors that the patient was struggling to understand. Cognitive therapy was developed as a strategy for exposing such thoughts and interpreting their meanings. This "emphasis on meanings, the role of symbols, and the generalization of reaction patterns across diverse situations were all derivative" from earlier

¹⁷ See my discussion of James in chapter 5 ("Toward a Moral Equivalent of War") of *Meditation & the Martial Arts*.

¹⁸ Aaron Beck, *Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), ix.

theories. “However, the meanings were found to be available through introspection, and not to require the penetration or circumvention of a wall of repression in order to be elucidated.”¹⁹

Consistent with other forms of psychotherapy, “cognitive therapy aims to make conscious certain processes that are initially unconscious.”²⁰ But it is somewhat idiosyncratic in the extent to which these processes are regarded as being forms of *cognition*, moreover, in the extent to which these cognitions (or “cognitive schemas”), sometimes faulty ones, are believed dramatically to affect emotions, behavior and relationships. “Cognition” is understood by Beck and his colleagues to embrace “the entire range of variables implicated in information processing”; these include not only elements of consciousness but also of the environment, so that “cognition is a contextual, interactional construct.”²¹ Cognitive therapy techniques “rely on correction of dysfunctional cognitive content and processing.”²² Put another way, such techniques aim to correct false interpretations, interpretations that are not benign but can result in distressful emotional or behavioral consequences.

The semiotic context of cognitive therapy (i.e., its presupposition that the “meaning making function of cognition” is “the central pathway to psychological adaptation”²³) clearly resonates with a Peircean pragmatism, as does its emphasis on habituation (whether in talk about generalized “reaction patterns” or about troubling “automatic thoughts” and the “cognitive

¹⁹ B. Alford and A. Beck, *The Integrative Power of Cognitive Therapy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125

²¹ *Ibid.*, 106

²² *Ibid.*, 99

²³ *Ibid.*, 64

vulnerabilities” that they can represent). Something like Peircean self control is sought through the interactions between therapist and patient, as well as through “homework” assigned by the former to the latter, as problematic habits of interpretation are identified, ideally to be replaced with ones that are more felicitous. These flawed interpretations can be about oneself, one’s environment, or one’s future goals and possibilities (self, world and future each comprising elements of the “cognitive triad” developed in Beck’s early work on depression).²⁴ Indeed, this practice of attending to the future, of inquiring about how one’s relationship to future versions of oneself is to be cognized or interpreted, also has a distinctively Peircean flavor. Nor would the pragmatic fallibilist be disturbed by Beck’s encouragement to patients that they should continuously “question their interpretations.”²⁵ James and Peirce would both be comfortable with the recognition that a significant number of techniques in cognitive therapy are designed to achieve “redirection of the attentional resources” of the patient in order to bring troubling automatic thoughts to awareness.²⁶ And any classical pragmatist would be inclined to embrace the basic therapeutic goal of facilitating “change in the patient’s thinking and belief system” as the key to effecting emotional or behavioral change;²⁷ like pragmatism, such a strategy presupposes a certain continuity of thought, feeling and action. (Peirce articulated this presupposition with his well known claim that a “belief,” whether held consciously or unconsciously, is that upon which a person would be prepared to act.)

²⁴ Ibid., p. 16. See also Beck, *Depression: Causes and Treatment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967).

²⁵ Beck, *Prisoners of Hate*, xiii.

²⁶ Alford and Beck, *The Integrative Power of Cognitive Therapy*, 20.

²⁷ Judith Beck, *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 2.

Sullivan's predilection for pragmatism would likely render certain aspects of this admittedly crude sketch of cognitive therapy attractive to her as well. But she would obviously regard Beck et. al. as being dangerously naïve in their disregard for the massive "wall of repression" that prevents unconscious meanings from being readily "elucidated." Once again, this is where Sullivan's pragmatism appears to rub up against her psychoanalytic commitments. In the spirit of Sullivan's own discussion, however, it is important to insure that the contrast between these perspectives is not unduly exaggerated. Several observations seem salient here.

In the first place, it is possible to decide, in any given case or situation, that a person's racist feelings or behavior can be linked to automatic thoughts that function at the fringe of consciousness and are not typically submitted to scrutiny. On the premises of cognitive therapy, these thoughts can be derived from a person's "core beliefs"—about the self, about others or about the world—very general beliefs that either may be mistaken or mistakenly applied in a particular situation. These beliefs are so general in scope that, while they may be activated by a particular situation, one might typically not be aware of having them or might even be convinced of having other beliefs that conflict with them. Most often these beliefs develop in childhood, as a result of the child's regular interactions with significant others and with the environment.²⁸

To offer a mundane example (without pretending to supply any detailed psychotherapeutic analysis), suppose that a white man—well-educated, who believes himself to be committed to achieving racial justice in our society, someone quickly appalled by reports about viciously racist behavior or comments, who considers a number of African Americans to

²⁸ Ibid., 166

be among his good friends, etc.—is driving down the street in his predominantly white neighborhood and suddenly observes a group of black men gathered on a sidewalk or at a street corner. Or suppose he loses the competition for a job that he suddenly learns has been awarded to a black person. In each case he experiences a mild, but visceral and negative response to the situation. What are the automatic thoughts that may have triggered such a response? What are the core beliefs from which such thoughts may have been derived? The theory underlying cognitive therapy suggests that finding the answer to these questions may require the development of certain interpretive skills, ones that sharpen introspection, enable the proper identification of subtle behavioral cues, etc.. It may also require collaboration between that person and someone else who is trained to help facilitate such skill development. But it is certainly possible, even though sometimes difficult, to achieve this kind of interpretive success, with correspondingly good results for shaping future habits of feeling and of behavior.

This is my first observation. Many persons who would not identify themselves as “racist” or would not believe themselves to embody habits of racial privilege might become troubled (either through self-reflection or because of someone else’s critique) by their reactions to a certain state of affairs, whether feeling responses or actual behavior. Highly pragmatic strategies articulated by the proponents of cognitive therapy can be useful for addressing these reactions. *Even if* the roots of racism run much deeper, *beneath* cognition, well protected by entrenched mechanisms that make access to such roots exceedingly difficult to obtain, that would not completely undermine claims about the utility of such strategies or the value of their effects. If

this much, at the very least, is possible to achieve, then the moral imperative to resist racism requires us to enact such strategies.

Another observation concerns the bi-location of racism in Sullivan's subtle account *both* in and *beyond* the individual, also her embracing of something like a notion of the "collective unconscious." Addressing *my* automatic thoughts and exposing *my* core beliefs is of little value in the battle against racism if my society also uses me—whatever my conscious intentions—to achieve its own "trans-individual" goals as a white racist society.²⁹ Of course, Peirce was perfectly willing to talk about such corporate "personalities," his objective idealism supplying a supportive metaphysical framework for such a way of thinking. On his view, I do not have a belief or idea so much as *it* uses me to "get itself thought." The plausibility of this sort of metaphysical proposal is not likely to be established to everyone's satisfaction anytime soon. But it is certainly worthwhile, in evaluating the resources supplied by cognitive therapy, to share some of Sullivan's worries about "atomistic individualism," that is, to raise serious questions about whether or not cognitive therapists conceive of the self in adequately "transactional" terms.

A final observation: Perhaps the difference here is less fundamental than it is a matter of degree. The cognitive therapist's claim that hidden meanings can be exposed to analysis should not obscure the fact that this can be an arduous task; certain habits can become deeply entrenched, nearly invisible, and forcefully resistant to change. On the other hand, no matter how deep and non-rational one presumes the forces that lurk in the human unconscious to be, any kind of practical strategy designed for dealing with these forces will involve engaging in

²⁹ See Sullivan's "Conclusion" in *Revealing Whiteness*

some kind of interpretive behavior. Once again, a key issue may be how broadly one understands a category such as “cognition” or how richly nuanced a conception of “interpretation” one chooses to employ in one’s theorizing.³⁰

V

Peirce’s favorite medieval philosopher, Duns Scotus, represented a minority opinion among the scholastics in regarding theology as essentially a “practical” rather than a strictly theoretical science. This by no means involved a repudiation of theology’s theoretical status (indeed, Scotus was a champion theorizer, one of the most subtle and difficult thinkers of the medieval period). But it did involve recognition that the “habit of theology” is practical, that God is “one who should be loved and according to rules from which praxis can be elicited.”³¹ The classical pragmatists were all “Scotists” in this regard, refusing to drive a wedge between theory and practice, between thoughts and actions. And it seems to me that cognitive therapy operates within the same general framework. Cognitions are tangibly linked to emotions and actions; meanings really do influence what we feel and do.

³⁰ I would argue, for a great variety of reasons, that Peirce’s concept of “semiosis” is broader, richer, and more nuanced than what is supplied by most theories of “cognition.”

³¹ John Duns Scotus, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, ed. Allan Wolter (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 137. On the relevance of Scotus for contemporary theology and on his relationship to pragmatism see my articles: “The Uses of Pragmatism in Modern Theology,” in *Theologie Zwischen Pragmatismus und Existenzdenken: Festschrift für Hermann Deuser*, ed. G. Linde, R. Purkarthofer, H. Schulze & P. Steinacker (Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag, 2006), 13-24; and “Pragmatism, Democracy and the Future of Catholic Theology,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 30 (September 2009): 288-302

What we feel or do can be tinged with or permeated by racism. Moreover, whenever this occurs, it may be something of which we are aware or not aware. If what we are doing is theology, then the effects can be poisonous. (This is no more or less true than in the doing of anything else, but it is important to recognize that theology has no special immunity to this disease, that the prevalence of discourse concerning love and justice in theology, is not an inoculation protecting against racism.) And so it may be a useful exercise for theologians consistently to examine their “core beliefs,” not exclusively or even primarily those basic religious beliefs that they share with other members of the religious community, but even more general beliefs about themselves, other persons, and the world. This is an ongoing practice that can take the form of a spiritual exercise; and I have tried to suggest here that the philosophy of pragmatism and cognitive therapy yield interesting resources for helping us to select appropriate exercises and to understand their utility.

It is important to recognize the extent to which such a practice must be ongoing for the theologian. People typically consult psychotherapists when they are distressed. Something they are feeling or doing has become problematic for them and so they seek help in understanding and so hopefully correcting the problem. But as Sullivan has convincingly portrayed racist habits, they are frequently unconscious and unnoticed (at least by the person who possesses them). It then becomes the purpose of a theologian’s self-critical practice to render problematic what otherwise may have seemed unobjectionable. Similarly, the pragmatist typically describes habit formation (in the neo-Darwinian spirit that shaped classical pragmatism) as a process of adaptation to certain environments. Yet some environments—indeed, many of them—embody

structures of white privilege and of racial oppression so that it becomes the theologian's responsibility not primarily to identify adaptive strategies (except, perhaps, as temporary and provisional), but rather to call for significant political and social change.

These remarks are intended to suggest that theologians need to be proactive in their resistance to racism. They need to be vigilant. The disciplined regularity with which they should attend to such matters signals the need for ongoing introspection. And that introspection can take a variety of forms. (Once again, I am convinced that theologians have much to learn from William James in this regard.) I want to identify only three of these briefly in my conclusion.

One form that such introspection might take is what Catholic theologians have traditionally called the "examination of conscience." It would be instructive to analyze such a practice equipped with insights drawn from pragmatism and from the theory underlying cognitive therapy. A prominent example of this type of introspection is supplied by the meditations included in St. Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises, within which the regular examination of conscience occurs as a steady theme.³² Ignatius is consistently asking persons engaged in the exercises to imagine themselves in certain situations and then also to imagine what they are *thinking* and *feeling* in those situations. There is a remarkable parallel between this sort of practice and what occurs between therapist and patient in cognitive therapy; even the importance of the role of the spiritual director in the exercises seems mirrored in therapy by the crucial performance of the therapist in interactions with patients. All of these connections should be carefully explored.

³² *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, tr. L. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951).

What Christian theology adds to pragmatism and psychotherapy at this juncture is a certain critical perspective and impetus that the former may be lacking. Ignatius presupposes that the exercitant is a sinner; indeed, the entire first week of the exercises is devoted to the cultivation of a profound sense of one's sinfulness. Examination of conscience does not occur in a vacuum, as if it might be the case that one is entirely free of sin and the process of such an examination is a casual checking. Rather, this form of introspection is guided by specific principles and "leading questions" that are intended to expose the deeply entrenched sources of human sinfulness (consistent with pragmatism, Ignatius is not concerned with faults displayed episodically but rather with patterns of thought and behavior deeply ingrained.) Thoughts, words and deeds are all carefully examined, since the exercitant's actions during any given period of time can seem exemplary, but in a way that only temporarily obscures sinful habits of thought and feeling. The comprehensive nature of such an introspective exercise makes it especially useful for the purposes of theologians whose objective is to identify forms of racism that might not be readily displayed in one's observable behavior—perhaps not even in spoken or written acts of communication—but nevertheless infect thoughts and feelings. The latter, once they are discerned, might then be connected with patterns of speech and behavior that did not initially appear as racist but can now be evaluated as such. In any event, Ignatius, the pragmatists and cognitive therapists would all seem to be in agreement on one crucial point: consistently sinful/problematic (here racist) thoughts and feelings, willy nilly, will eventually manifest themselves in speech and behavior.

A second type of introspection is more akin to what Peirce described as *musement*. It is a less directed, more playful form of self-inquiry (with parallels in the psychotherapeutic practices of free association and of role-playing). Here there is an implicit acknowledgement of those more “deeply shaded” regions of the human psyche. In the process of such cognitive play, thoughts and feelings that may lie well below the surface of consciousness are permitted to bubble to the surface and become available for contemplation. On the premises articulated both by Peirce and by the cognitive therapists, however, this subterranean material is nevertheless to be perceived as cognition (indeed, feelings were vague thoughts in Peirce’s view). Even when unconscious they can dramatically shape the human project of making meaning. Once exposed, their own meanings can be interrogated and explored.

Recall that for Peirce *musement* was a practice of “being awake to what is about or within you,” so that while it can be conceived as an introspective exercise it is by no means exclusively so. “Playful” but disciplined attention to what lies “about” or beyond the self can result in fresh insight concerning how certain institutions, environments or relationships are functioning to support habits of racial privilege. Equally important, it can take the form of a “deep listening” to those others who are continuously oppressed by such structures, those without the privilege or the habits that it generates.³³ The fact that listening to and learning about the experiences of such persons can be transformative for the listener is morally secondary to the

³³ I borrow the concept of “deep listening” from the Vietnamese poet and thinker, Thich Nhat Hanh, as he employs it to describe a type of Buddhist meditative practice that is thoroughly “transactional” in the sense that Sullivan describes/prescribes.

fact that such persons need to be heard. That is to say, this kind of listening is morally obligated and not merely felicitous as a catalyst for deepened self-awareness.

For the theologian acting on Ignatian principles and premises, the “discernment of spirits” constitutes a form of deep listening or attentiveness with a peculiar moral and existential significance (and thus perhaps not so thoroughly “playful” as in the case either of Peirce’s musement or of certain therapeutic strategies).³⁴ The assumption at the outset is that the landscape being surveyed, both internally and externally, is not value-neutral. On the contrary, it is “spirit-filled,” charged with agency, in some cases empowering and benign with respect to the exercitant, but in many instances hostile and dangerous. Moreover, Ignatius supplies specific “rules” for this meditative exercise, among them, the same principle of detachment (Ignatius’ “indifference”) that Peirce regarded as crucial for musement, but also several others that, when taken collectively, constitute a distinctive hermeneutics of suspicion. Even on occasions when the person engaged in meditation may be inclined toward a positive evaluation of her/his state of affairs, the work of the devil can sometimes be discerned, dulling that person’s sensibilities, undermining her/his vigilance with feelings of complacency and self-satisfaction. For the theologian seriously committed to tearing out the roots of powerful habits of racial privilege, *both* the clear recognition that there are potent forces in the environment acting to corrupt one’s feelings and behavior *and* the cultivation of an attitude of suspicion toward feelings/behaviors that seem wonderfully free of racism should prove to be invaluable resources.

³⁴ *Spiritual Exercises*, “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits,” 141-50.

One of the strengths of Sullivan's discussion is her insistence on regarding every person as a psychosomatic unity. A sense of white privilege is not simply a state of mind in her view, but rather it is thoroughly embodied, displayed in one's physical comportment, as well as in the way that one perceives and reacts to other bodies in physical space. Consequently, the task of introspection can be greatly facilitated by disciplined practices that engage the body.³⁵ Such bodywork as a component of spiritual exercise has an ancient history in religious traditions. Here the theologian is focused on discerning how bodies display racist habits in their comportment, movement and interactions, consequently, how such habits can be effectively dissolved. Although traditional religious exercises might have to be modified, adapted to the specific purpose of eroding/eliminating habits of racial privilege, there is a wealth of resources here not yet carefully explored. Such bodily practices have been understood as potentially self-transformative, but primarily with the intention of facilitating devotion. The task would be to isolate those that are more directly relevant to inter-subjectivity and community, to affecting the nature and quality of our interactions not only with the Deity but with each other. Such discipline of the body is the sort of thing that theologians sometimes study; I am suggesting that it ought to be conceived as continuous with our theological practices, the kind of thing that all theologians should actually attempt to do.

³⁵ I supply a pragmatic analysis of certain Asian martial disciplines in *Meditation & the Martial Arts*. See also Sullivan's discussion of the Alexander Technique in her earlier book on *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), as well as Robert Shusterman's discussion of the Feldenkrais Method in *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Since theology is a human practice, it can easily become a racist one. It is also a form of cognition, of meaning making, with all of the potential significance that Peirce, Beck and others have attached to such phenomena. This final comment is intended just to remind us that if pragmatists and cognitive therapists are correct, then our theologies are always already “practical” in the sense that they should shape our ongoing behavior. The clarification of theological meaning, especially if it is something that communities do rather than individuals alone, can result in a demand for the significant transformation of how we live together, of the structures in which we live, and of the institutions that maintain them. This is only to assert, once again, that our theologies are best understood when they are conceived as being thoroughly transactional (in Sullivan’s terms), operating “according to rules from which praxis can be elicited” (as Duns Scotus knew).