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American Slave Narratives as Sources of Philosophical Anthropology

Turning First Person Stories into Philosophy

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Abstract

While assessing the various registers of philosophy, I suggest reading American slave narratives as a source of philosophical anthropology. Since this sort of texts is not intended to be philosophy, they pose interpretive challenges. Still, these narratives from humans who fight denial of their being human reveal, in a non-thematic way, certain essentials of being human.

*American Slave Narratives as Sources of Philosophical Anthropology. Turning First
Person Stories into Philosophy¹*

Philosophy is as philosophers do – humanity is as humans do. In order to find out what it means to be human, I suggest reading first-person reports of humans whose being human is endangered. Slave narratives are the case I am studying here.

American slave narrative is a literary genre that comprises the following components: it reports in first person the life of a slave in North America from around the Civil War (1861–1865) until the end of the 19th century. Many of these slave narratives were put down in writing not by the slaves themselves but by a sympathetic person, many of whom were white Protestants. It is striking that many slave narratives have a woman as a hero. All of these stories were narrated and published with an abolitionist agenda; that is to say, with the goal in mind to support abolition of slavery in North America through exposing the cruelty and injustice of slavery with personal examples. The first person perspective is therefore a crucial literary tool; rhetorical tropes include vividness of storytelling, pathos, details, and also exaggeration. The rhetorical outlook does not disparage the content; on the contrary, the note-takers of the narratives, if not the authors themselves thought it most compelling to have the people speak for themselves. They intended to impress their audience for the sake of the cause of anti-slavery. Nevertheless, we as readers who are no longer the target audience may well profit from the first person perspective in taking what the speakers bring forward about their life and experience seriously.

Some of the slave narratives are so well-written, most conspicuously that of Harriet Jacobs, that doubts of their authenticity were raised.² With this observation we approach the problem of the reliability of such slave narratives, both as to details and to the general direction of the plot. These are questions that can only be addressed for each individual text. But the general hermeneutical principles of reading historical documents apply. To put it shortly: if something is presented as surprising or unusual, it is probably authentic and hence deserves special attention. On the other hand, recurring motifs and themes over many sources indicate

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²Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Jean Fagan Yellin, “Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative,” *American Literature* 53, no. 3 (November 1981): 479–86.

recurring experiences. For instance, if many slave narratives state that the slave is ignorant of his or her date and place of birth, then in an individual text this may be used in a tropical manner; however, it has become tropical because factually most slaves do not know their birth date. In that sense, this trope is worth considering under a particular perspective.

The perspective of my study of American slave narratives is that of philosophy. Regardless of the specific body of sources, the philosophical question I am pursuing is that of philosophical anthropology: what does it mean to be human? Frequently, the answer is derived from philosophical tenets, such as the body-soul compound (man is an animal with reason) and from metaphysical hypostases (man is the intermediary level between pure spirits and matter). Sometimes, a philosophical anthropology is based on the life and existence of humans and refers to their common way of behaving (man is a social animal, humanity equals existence, etc.). However, it occurred to me that one could suspend the answer to the question: “What does it mean to be human?”, and observe humans asserting their humanness. Methodologically speaking, the task is not to apply theoretical anthropology to a given group of human beings. For instance, assuming that humans are social animals, one could find realizations of social patterns in any kindergarten, or the emergence of solidarity in a coal mine. Rather, since philosophical anthropology is philosophy in the first place, it has to find its object of study first and then to elevate it. This elevation is done to the level of abstraction at which the concepts build themselves on a level that does not apply merely to the empirical object of study but to the essence of it; that is, to the essential properties of being human.³ That means in this case: slave narratives are utterly contingent products of individual human beings. But these human beings speak about their being human, even when they speak about pain, sex, hunger, or gratification. They speak to the note-takers and to the audience with the intent to convey their being humans and therefore their being exempt of slavery. The latter part is to be taken for granted, today. The first part, the assertion to be humans, is a possible source of philosophical anthropology.

More radically speaking: I suggest approaching philosophical anthropology from outside humanity, namely from a point of view, as though humanity were not something known. An account of philosophical anthropology from outside humanity also entails philosophizing from

³ On the problems of this terminology, which is not topical here, see Teresa Robertson and Philip Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2016, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/essential-accidental/>.

outside philosophical methods, provided we know of human nature predominantly from philosophical definitions of humanness.

To give two examples: some of Isaac Asimov's robot stories are allegories of slavery. They raise the question: what makes a robot appear human and does it seriously fail being human?⁴ The other example: when Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés Sepúlveda debated about the human rights of Amerindians, Las Casas took on the insult that these people were barbarians and then showed the elements of humanity present in them.⁵ The imagination of a science fiction writer and the zeal of a Catholic theologian show pathways to understanding humanity philosophically from sources that are not intended to be philosophical; and at the same time, they show that humanity may be captured at those points, where humanity is questioned or outright denied. At times, to be human is denied explicitly, sometimes, performatively (which is worse).

Denial of humanity is, by all standards, one common denominator of slavery; and even the slaveholders do not deny that. Therefore, it is appropriate for an abolitionist to quote the battle cry of slaves: "Am I not a Man and a Brother?", as it was circulated in early 19th-century England.⁶ But the easy answer from the slaveholder was: No! Therefore we need to find a more complex response in the slave narratives. As a matter of fact, slaves rarely thematized their being humans, but they asserted it in the actions they narrated. This is where philosophical interpretation starts. If it is true – as 20th-century philosophical anthropology teaches⁷ – that to be human means to position oneself in the world with fellow humans, then such positioning is human in an elementary way, but it only becomes philosophy when analyzed and interpreted philosophically. Every human assesses environment and experience, but that turns into philosophy when it is interpreted as the agency that characterizes a human being. We also can safely say that this sort of anthropology that defines humans as essentially "eccentric," as

⁴ Cf. Paul Richard Blum, "Robots, Slaves, and the Paradox of the Human Condition in Isaac Asimov's Robot Stories", *Annals of Cultural Studies (Roczniki Kulturoznawcze)*, forthcoming.

⁵ Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apología o declaración y defensa universal de los derechos del hombre y de los pueblos*, ed. Vidal Abril Castelló, Edición paleográfica y crítica. [Valladolid]: Junta de Castilla y León, Consejería de Educación y Cultura, 2000,

<http://www.saavedrafajardo.org/Archivos/LIBROS/Libro0054.pdf>.

⁶ The divulged image of a slave exclaiming "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" was designed by Josiah Wedgwood in the late 18th century in Scotland; see Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, 76–76.

⁷ Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*. Darmstadt: Reichl, 1928; Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928.

Helmuth Plessner did, also defines humanity as a non-given: it is the essence of being human to question one's own humanity. For, assessing the world and fellowship amounts to not taking them for granted.

Although in invoking 20th-century existential philosophy (such as Scheler and Plessner) I might appear to be making use of professional philosophy, I still look to deviate from standard approaches. First, because existential philosophy was itself historically a veering off from established methods of philosophical investigation. Second, established philosophical anthropology of the 20th century worked with the phenomenological method of self-investigation and, in the case of Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner, applied zoological research as a means to look at humans by differentiating them from non-humans. Contrary to that, I suggest reading testimonies of humans who, by definition, were denied humanity. Obviously, the first person is the starting point of any investigation into human nature. This has been so since Augustine's *Confessions*, at the latest. Here, the first person is not me, the author, but the slaves speaking of themselves. While the narrative remains subjective, so to say, the message can be philosophically objectified insofar as I, the reader, am not the subject of the story.

The proposed method of reading these narratives from the 19th century is as follows. Every text of this sort has evident circumstances that need to be taken into account but also sorted out. Here I cannot avoid giving examples. Of the three versions of Frederick Douglass' autobiography, the second and third turned into elaborate books against the institution of slavery that increasingly departed from the sheer telling of events in favor of readymade interpretations of how the audience, the abolitionists, were to understand them. The author increasingly 'processed' his experiences.⁸ Nevertheless the brute facts that he shares of his life as a slave give enough material to interpret philosophically. Most of the texts have an abolitionist purpose, and many of them were written down by abolitionists while interviewing slaves or former slaves. However, it is very easy to separate editorial comments from first-hand information, especially as many editors of slave stories cannot hold back their surprise at facts they are writing down from the voice of their witness. Surprise is, indeed, a heuristic means. When, for instance, Sojourner

⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Anti-slavery Office, 1845; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part I - Life as a Slave, Part II - Life as a Freeman*. New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855; Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Hartford, Conn.: Park Pub., 1884.

Truth mentions that she viewed her owner as a God, we then learn an authentic attitude of the slave.⁹

Reading through the various narratives, a list of recurring themes builds itself. Here I may mention just a few: naming, home, religion, sex, property, and resistance. Whatever the slaves deemed worth telling can be taken to be essential for their understanding of themselves. Other things surprise the reader, after some experience, by their absence: not only are the slaves conscious of the lack of most early childhood memories, they also rarely express consciousness of time in all forms: elapsing time, future, or history. The changes of seasons are structuring elements of their life, as are the changes of their masters – but, as far as I see, without a temporal index.

In a nutshell, what emerges from reading slave narratives that constitutes a philosophical anthropology? A person is in search to affirm his/her identity with the help of names, rudiments of family relations, masters, and those events that prove him/her to be an agent. Religion, rarely within any denominational frame, is the immediate and defining resource of meaning, consolation, hope, and justification. Home is virulent through its absence; it is felt as a loss and a longing. Consequently, being at home converges with being at peace with God. Religion is the virtual home of humans. Family likewise exerts an influence on the individual by way of endangerment and as a virtual bond that overcomes the gritty reality. To be sold ‘down the river’ does not only entail deterioration of work conditions, it is the effective severance of human bonds. As intangible and ideal as the home is, so is family that aim for which it is worth longing, fighting, or suffering. Sexual relationships are worth mentioning only as sexual slavery, that is, the exploitation by the slave owners. Every precariousness can be turned into a lever of resistance; that is also true with sex. Harriet Jacobs, for instance, deliberately accepts the courtship of a freeman, just to snub her master and to frustrate his adulterous passes.

Let us take, as an example, the issue of property. Harriet Jacobs for instance tells about her grandmother who was able to make some extra money by baking cookies. This cookie-making episode is embedded in the explanation of the power held by the slave owner over the slaves' working time and ownership. The purpose of the baking was to save "for a fund to

⁹ Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, ed. Olive Garrison Gilbert. Boston: Printed for the author [J. B. Yerrinton and Son], 1850, 33 (digital edition, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html>); cf. Paul Richard Blum, “‘I Felt So Tall Within’: Anthropology in Slave Narratives,” *Annals of Cultural Studies (Roczniki Kulturoznawcze)* 4, no. 2 (2013): 21–39.

purchase her children." Initially the "business proved profitable". But when the master died, the children were separated from their mother and divided among the masters' children. The slave woman continued working and saving, up to 300 dollars. When the mistress begged for that money as a loan for her own private needs, the narrator does not even bother telling that the money was gone. She comments that the grandmother "trusted solely to [the mistress's] honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave!" Now the key term in this section of the narrative is "property". When the master died, "the property was divided among his heirs," and "according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* a property, can *hold* no property."¹⁰

We can read this story first as it was meant, namely, to pity the woman for being cheated in a system in which some people are deprived of any right. We can also observe the economic situation and its irony, as a slave gets permission to make some earnings out of her own labor, which is added to the slave labor, and is cheated of that added gain. Then, there is also the legal conundrum that slaves are property that by definition cannot own property. Transcending the psychological, economic, labor, and legal perspectives, this little story tells us something about the grandmother as a human being: it is she who leaves all the paradoxes behind. For, knowing that she is owned by her master, she also plays along with his ownership of her children and tries to out-own him on that, namely to buy them from him. In a paradoxical way she employs the ownership business in order to re-own her own children and disown the master of them. (Just in case we were wondering, yes, the kids also got some cookies, as Harriet, one of the children confirms.) But reality strikes back when the owner dies, and it strikes a second time when the mistress bilks the grandmother of her savings.

To conclude, these are four possible inferences about humanity we can take from this case; and these deserve further search for sources and their potential of a philosophical anthropology:

First philosophical lesson learned: man is not only a homo oeconomicus, people by being humans manipulate the rules of the game. They can turn anything into merchandise, slaves, for instance, or cookies. In the same vein, humans are social, legal, or working beings that any time can turn their awareness towards their activities and make them the object of their thinking, planning, and acting.

Second lesson: humans keep trying.

¹⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 5–6.

Harriet Jacobs did not think of that, but she shows it in unmistakable narration.

An interesting example of conscious narrative with a kernel of philosophy comes from Henry “Box” Brown. He earned his nickname because he made his escape from slavery by shipping himself in a box to the free states. In his narrative he does not conceal awareness of the rhetorical and propagandistic challenge of his story. And yet some philosophy of humankind slips through:

At an early age, my mother would take me on her knee, and pointing to the forest trees adjacent, now being stripped of their thick foliage by autumnal winds, would say to me, "my son, as yonder leaves are stripped from off the trees of the forest, so are the children of slaves swept away from them by the hands of cruel tyrants;" and her voice would tremble, and she would seem almost choked with her deep emotions, while the big tears would find their way down her saddened cheeks, as she fondly pressed me to her heaving bosom, as if to save me from so dreaded a calamity.¹¹

Obviously this sentence is meant to move our hearts. It depicts a loving mother with her child near a forest in winter full of “deep emotions.” Any gifted artist could have sketched that scene, even without actually witnessing it. And yet, the author takes recourse to a childhood memory. He chose as an opening to his story a pivotal moment of his life. The experience is that of present presaging future. A moment in external nature mirrors future calamities. A mother is speaking to her son about her imminent sorrows. Nature, the winter winds, parallels human tyranny. Or rather, human cruelty is in search for an image in nature.

Third philosophical lesson learned: humans relate to nature as patterns of explaining their lives to themselves.

Fourth lesson: humans take their memories as resources of meaning.



¹¹ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box Three Feet Long and Two Wide and Two and a Half High. Written From a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns.* Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849, 15.