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## BOOK DISCUSSIONS

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Book Discussion

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### HEIRS OF OPPRESSION

Professor J. Angelo Corlett has written a book that is both philosophically and historically important. In clear and lucid terms he examines the best and worst of the arguments for reparations to Native Americans and African Americans. Finding most of the arguments unpersuasive, he boldly puts forth his own argument. An argument he thinks, if given the consideration it deserves, will be persuasive in convincing others that reparations to these groups are indeed justified. The basic premise of his book is that reparations are owed to Native Americans and African Americans because of the evil that has been inflicted on them by the United States government and some of the corporations and other groups sanctioned by the government. The evil deeds these groups have done must be addressed. He states very strongly that the actions of these groups represent acts of that are close to pure evil. While it is not his contention that Native Americans and African Americans are the only groups that deserve reparations, he thinks that the best case can be made for reparations for these groups. It is his contention that the experiences of these groups represent the “best” examples of why reparations can be justified.

While there is much to discuss in Professor Corlett’s book, I want to draw attention to four closely related themes or issues that are addressed in the book.

These are the themes of evil, autonomy, reconciliation, and reparations and the masses in the post reparation state. My questions for Professor Corlett will be drawn from my concerns regarding these issues.

#### **The United States as an Evil Empire**

Any reader of Professor Corlett’s book knows at least one thing about his feelings about the manner in which this country has treated Native Americans and African Americans. His indictment of the United States is that it is an evil empire. The United States is just evil. It is not the case that

the US was evil; it was and still is an evil place. Indeed, the only way one can understand the treatment of Native Americans and African Americans is to see the collective behavior towards these groups as evil. He States:

My claim that the United States is, comparatively and on balance, evil is meant as a moral assessment of its behavior over its lifetime. It is not meant to be a judgment based solely on one or two acts of conduct indicative of its general character. Nor is the moral judgment that the United States is evil meant to suggest, in referring to the unrectification of most of its worst evils, some instrumentalist conception of compensatory justice that would suggest that should the United States fully or adequately rectify its evils that it would somehow wipe the slate clean between its victims and itself, realizing moral equality in the Aristotelian sense. Rather, it is that the unrectified nature of some of the worst evils in history adds greatly to how evil the United States is, and speaks directly to the moral character of the United States.

Throughout this book, “evil” and its cognates shall be used to connote what is less than purely evil, assuming that the category “pure evil” is not empty, but significantly greater than merely bad actions. And it is assumed that evil acts, like bad and good ones, do not somehow mysteriously lose their moral properties of evil, goodness, or badness with the mere passage of time—no matter what the length. Unrectified evil is evil still, where “evil” refers to extraordinarily bad or untoward outcomes of events, actions, or states of affairs. (*Heirs*: pp: 3–4)

For Professor Corlett, the evil treatments of Native Americans and African Americans amount to crimes against humanity. While he seems to think that these crimes are close to being unforgivable, they are crimes for which amends must be made. Important here is that Corlett breaks with what he takes to be the traditional approach to making amends for wrongs. Corlett is not concerned with the repairing or reconciliation of relationships between Native Americans and African Americans with Whites. Indeed for him this is part of the problem; persons who write about forgiveness and reparations are too interested in bringing the injured party back into some sort of positive social relationship. For Corlett the history of wrongs is too heinous to think that there can be some “great coming together” after whites say they are sorry. Whites accordingly, that is the government and those other parties involved, must apologize and give back to Native Americans control of their land and give monies to African Africans. There are some other things that can be done such as destroying Mount Rushmore because it honors those persons who supported and condoned the evil done to Native Americans and Africans Americans. I like the Rushmore scheme, but it is not the only proposal he suggests. More to the point, what these people allowed to be done to Native Americans and African Americans disqualifies them as examples of the greatness of the United States. Those persons who committed, condone, co-signed the wicked treatment of Blacks and Native Americans were evil. Those persons who support the unjust and wicked treatment of Blacks and Native Americans now are evil. There are hints that the evil acts are unforgivable.

## Atonement and reconciliation

Given the nature of the evil, Corlett thinks that even if whites apologize, Blacks and Native American do not have to forgive whites for what whites have done to them. Nonetheless, it does not follow that not forgiving whites means they, whites, do not have to make amends for their wrong actions. Indeed, Corlett wants to reject any arguments that appear to require Blacks and Native Americans to forgive whites. If morally required to forgive, this move leads to the unacceptable conclusion that many persons take to be the case: “You accepted our apology, so we must be ok now.” Corlett seems to think that this move only makes whites feel better about their own humanity. Indeed, Corlett seems to think that making the accepting of an apology as morally required puts the onus on Blacks and Native Americans to accept any attempts to heal the broken relationship as a good faith effort on the part of whites. This move would allow whites to blame Blacks and Native Americans for being vengeful and failing to live up to standards of morality that require respect and forgiving for the good intentions of wrongdoers to reconcile. Does Corlett think most of the arguments on forgiveness and reparations seem to want to protect the status of whites as moral persons? What does this mean? Linda Radzik notes

The kind of reconciliation that is the goal of atonement, then, involves the restoration of a paradigmatically moral relationship. It is one wherein the parties regard one another and themselves as equally valuable moral persons.

The term ‘moral person’ is ambiguous. I use it here in two of its possible senses. First is the Kantian idea of a moral agent as someone who is capable of judging right and wrong and making choices on this basis. According to Kantian theory, the capacity for moral autonomy is the source of human beings’ moral status, a value all humans hold equally. Then there is the pedestrian notion of a moral person—someone who is not only capable of judging but likely to judge right from wrong correctly and be properly motivated by these judgments. Unlike moral status—one’s reputation as a morally good and trustworthy person—fluctuates over time. (Radzik, pp. 81– 82)

Corlett argues that whites have not been moral person in the second sense and it is unclear if they can ever be such beings. This means his understanding of cause of the evil in the United States becomes significant. He has to be careful here! Given his understanding of the causes of evil, we may be able to offer a conjecture of what the relationship between whites, African Americans and Native Americans will turn out to be after reparations. One thing is clear, he does not think that it should be assume that the goal is to reconcile the former oppressors with the formerly oppressed. In this regard, Native Americans and African must be allowed to choose how their relationship with whites will be after receiving reparations. To this end, Corlett makes an interesting move in regards to the agency and autonomy of Blacks and Native Americans.

## **Autonomy and self-respect**

Given the liberal Kantian conceptions of how we should treat persons as ends and never as means. Corlett shows in graphic detail the manner in which Native Americans and blacks were treated as means. Whether they were used as means for the material exploitation of the groups or the psychological status achieved by demeaning their humanity, the treatment they were accorded failed to concur with the respect and regard they were to be given by their being human. I would ask him if he thinks that part of his claim that the United States is evil is based on the fact that a country that was allegedly founded on the principles of social justice that pushed for respect and regard for individuals fail to do so in the case of Native Americans and African Americans. One point becomes clear in *Heirs Of Oppression*, Corlett wants to give full weight to the humanity and moral autonomy of both blacks and Native Americans. To his credit, he pushed the argument for moral autonomy to what appears to be its logical conclusion, if you do not take reconciliation as the goal of reparation. Respecting Blacks and Native Americans as autonomous beings who have the right to decide for themselves what their relationship with whites and the nature of that relationship must be and should be our major concern. This may mean that it is very possible that such a life would mean not living in some sort of blissful after apologetic world of social harmony with Whites. Blacks and Native Americans will have to decide for themselves what their relationship with whites will be after reparations. On the other hand, does Corlett want it both ways in regard to white autonomy? He claims to be giving them good reasons for giving reparations; the appeal is to their sense of ethical correctness and their logic. However, if they fail to adhere to what appears to be the dictates of reason, they should be forced to do so.

## **Reparation and the masses: leave them alone**

I want Professor Corlett to explain further his plan, if it is his plan, to give the masses of blacks control of some of the money they are to receive and yet have some large portion of it controlled by a group of blacks chosen to oversee the distribution of the funds. If he wants to respect the autonomy of the masses then it would appear that they should be given their monies and then decide if they want to invest it in the sort of collective schemes that he thinks are necessary. One reason that this problem comes to mind is his use of Dubois and the "Talented Tenth." Remember Dubois thought the masses were ignorant, lazy, and untrustworthy. Does Corlett trust the masses? As quoted above, he writes: "In the end, the call for reparations to Indians and blacks, along with the supportive argumentation, is nothing short of a call for monetary compensation and the individual autonomy and group national sovereignty that the monetary compensation enables these groups to achieve without presumptions of integration, apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation." Thus, it would appear that Native Americans and African Americans would have to come up with these schemes on their own; they cannot be imposed on them. We do not know

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what they will do with the funds, but in a sense that is ok. Or is it? In the end, does he think that reparation is meant to make their lives better in the United States or to make their lives whatever they make of it?

Finally, I have taken the liberty of using whites, meaning white people, as the source of evil in the United States, am I using a term that fails to capture the persons Professor Corlett thinks are the source of evil?