

Race and the Coloniality of Being: The Concept of Alienation in the Existential Thought of Frantz Fanon

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Abstract

The general understanding of how colonised people are economically and socially marginalised are the more dominant approaches to an understanding of the concept of alienation in Fanon. While these readings are important, the current paper underscores the point that philosophical analyses also feature prominently in Fanon's thought. It argues for an existentialist and therefore, philosophical reading of the concept of alienation in Fanon. The argument advanced is that, owing to the extraordinary circumstance placed upon the oppressed, race-based oppression leads to a special category, namely 'existential despair'. The paper makes use of relevant primary and secondary literature.

Key Words: Fanon, alienation, philosophical, despair, oppression, lived experience

Alienation, a Background

Generally, existentialists conceive of alienation as an inherently ontological¹ problem. In this way, alienation manifests as a subjective ‘lack’ of individual fulfillment. The predisposition of self-consciousness will thus, be towards itself and its realisation in the world even though, as Simone de Beauvoir (1948) has succinctly demonstrated², this striving of self-consciousness remains perpetually in vain. What follows, therefore, is an account of how existential philosophy, particularly of the Sartrean and Kierkegaardian type, firstly, understands alienation to be and secondly, how this conception influences Fanon in proposing an analysis of alienation concerning the oppressed subject. What will also become clear is that existentialists, in fact, differ on whether or not the state of alienation can be overcome; and, this difference has to do with the manner in which the various strands of the tradition conceive of Being. For instance, atheistic existentialist like Sartre are through and through pessimistic, whilst theistic existentialists like Gabriel Marcel and Kierkegaard believe that submission to faith can offer a way out of alienation. An understanding of Being as conceived in existential philosophy will thus, assist us in understanding how alienation arises.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1958), Sartre shows Being as constituted by two separate regions, namely ‘being-in-itself’ and ‘being-for-itself’. Being-in-itself is a mode of existence which is similar to that of things or objects and, as such, lies in a state of unconsciousness. As thinghood, it lacks the human character of selfhood. Like a tree, being-in-itself lacks the capacity to be other than what it is as it lacks possibility and/or transcendence; “It coincides with itself in full equivalence” (Sartre 1958, 74). Posited in this manner, being-in-itself does not have a without or distance and as such, it “cannot ‘be potentiality’ or have ‘potentialities’” (Sartre 1958, 98). Furthermore, the in-itself exists only in actuality; it “is full of itself [such that there is] no more perfect equivalence of content from container” (Sartre 1958, 74). Sartre further points out that “in itself it is what it is—in the absolute plenitude of its identity” (1958, 98). It is for this reason that he contrasts being-in-itself with human reality, or being-for-itself.

Thus, unlike its counterpart being-in-itself, being-for-itself is always consciousness of something. And although Sartre makes a distinction between the two, in actual fact they are not completely autonomous or separate from each other as they constitute the totality of Being.

¹ Also see Mary Warnock’s *The Philosophy of Sartre*.

² From her work titled *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. However, this is a view that also emerges quite poignantly in the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* when Sartre infers that: Man is a useless passion.

The concept of non-being is used by both Fanon and Sartre and means different things or conditions in the works of the two philosophers. For Sartre, non-being means the ability (and freedom) of self-consciousness to self-create. Fanon, on the other hand, has in mind a condition characterised, among other things, by oppression, violence, dispossession etc. So, although he accepts Sartre's thesis of the freedom of self-consciousness, Fanon recognises that certain socio-political institutions or structures frustrate certain race groups from realising or *becoming* 'themselves' in the manner they imagine themselves *to be*. Thus, the condition or situation of being unable to realise oneself is what Fanon has in mind when he speaks of 'non-being' or more accurately 'the zone of non-being'. For Sartre, non-being can be associated with the character or quality of the for-itself and understands it as having an ontological dimension of nothingness or transcendence.

Thus, to be sure being-for-itself *is* in the sense of being situated in space and time. Furthermore, it *is* in terms of which it can be defined on the basis of its facticity in the world. As Sartre comments, the for-itself "is in so far as it is thrown into a world and abandoned in a 'situation'...It is in so far as there is in it something of which it is not the foundation—its presence to the world" (1958, 79). However, because of the character of non-being that he ascribes to it, the for-itself, in the final analysis, can be summed up as "a being which is not what it is and which is what it is not" (1958, 79).

What can be gleaned from the above is, as human beings are born into various life situations - existentialists believe that it is not these that define the individual. Due to the operations of the structures of the for-itself, such situations become, but temporal and continuously, vanishing moments. This means that there is a gap that separates the individual from the object of thought, imagination and individual goals. It is thus, as a consequence of the structuration of Being in this manner that *becoming* itself becomes possible. As Sartre comments, consciousness "lacks something for something else—as the broken disc of the moon lacks that which would be necessary to complete it and transform it into a full moon" (1958, 95). Thus, at the heart of human reality is the *lack* of fulfilment. This can also be seen when Sartre further comments that "What I ceaselessly aim towards is myself, that which I am not, my own possibilities" (cited in Warnock 1965, 44). Thus, from the manner in which Sartre conceives of Being, alienation arises as the subjective lack that self-consciousness strives in vain to fulfil. For this very reason, there can be no resolution of the state of alienation in Sartre's philosophy. This, however, is not the case in the philosophy of Kierkegaard as we shall see below. However, what emerges from this discussion is the fact that human beings cannot solely be defined in terms of corporeality or simply overdetermined from without; for, as nothingness or as a lack, s/he is endowed with inner subjectivity and agency. Furthermore, there are

similarities in the way in which Sartre and Kierkegaard conceive of the self as the following brief discussion shall demonstrate. This is so despite the fact that there is disagreement on the question of whether there can be a resolution of the state of alienation or not.

We have already noted that Kierkegaard grasps the self in a similar way that Sartre conceives of Being, that is, as a composition of two modes of existence, namely the finite and the infinite. These modes of existence correspond to Sartre's being-in-itself and being-for-itself respectively. Moreover, Kierkegaard associates finitude with necessity and the 'eternal' whereas he associates infinitude with possibility, freedom and temporality. The self is now viewed by Kierkegaard (1980, 13) as a synthesis or relation between these opposing or paradoxical elements. Evidently, this is similar to the way that Sartre conceives of the in-itself and the for-itself as discussed earlier. It is important to note, however, that not only is the self a synthesis but it must, at the same time, strive towards finding a balance or equilibrium between the two modes of existence such that should equilibrium not obtain, this will necessarily lead to alienation, a condition which Kierkegaard describes as 'despair'. However, in relating itself to itself, the self must still relate itself to another which is construed by Kierkegaard as the foundation of itself namely, God (1980, 13-14). The existence of God at the foundation of the self in Kierkegaard's system, allows for the possibility of the state of alienation to be *resolvable*. Thus, contrary to Sartre, Kierkegaard is of the view that alienation can, in fact, be overcome. This occurs by the way in which the self in relating itself to itself, relates itself to God whose essence is its existence. Thus, at the foundation of its existence is God. The self ought, therefore, strive towards finding a congruence with its Creator.

Teeming in the juxtaposition of the self and Being in the manner just described, are the notions of alienation (and freedom) that arise. Furthermore, the manner in which the notion of alienation arises in the two philosophers, becomes important for Fanon in beginning to think about an alienated black subject. It must be remembered that for both Kierkegaard and Sartre, alienation consists in the denial of the possibility for otherness, of possibility, and the denial of the ability to self-create. In essence, alienation arises from the mortification of the categories of transcendence.

Kierkegaard takes the matter further and argues for alienation as a misrelation in the self's desired relation to itself, a phenomenon that results in despair. This means that there always exists a possibility of a misrelation insofar as human reality is concerned. In fact, despair results from the very incidence of there being a misrelation. As he puts it "despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself" (Kierkegaard 1980, 15). Thus, in the occurrence of a misrelation, the individual experiences alienation in a two-fold

significance: alienation from the self (self-alienation) and alienation from the world. From this we notice what Kierkegaard explicitly shares with Sartre insofar as alienation is concerned, namely the idea of there being tension inherent in the paradoxical relation between the finite and the infinite, the in-itself and the for-itself. Furthermore, this brief intellectual background becomes the foundation upon which Fanon begins thinking about the alienation of the oppressed. Our aim is to ascertain the extent to which Fanon taps into this rich intellectual resource towards proposing a theory of alienation for the oppressed.

Fanon and Alienation

Fanon is initially in agreement with both Sartre and Kierkegaard insofar as the freedom of consciousness is concerned. However, he soon realises that when extrapolated to the case of colonised cultures, apartheid or metropolitan racism, both Kierkegaard's and Sartre's theses become problematic. This is accounted for by the fact that there is a unique situation of racial prejudice confronting the oppressed subject that gets omitted when confronting the problem only from an ontological stand point. For, within the context of anti-blackness, which Fanon addresses himself, there is a conscious and deliberate effort to smother the black-self and to dominate the oppressed black bodies. As such, measures are put in place to ensure that the colonised subject's future social and economic outlook is thwarted and made as feeble as possible. Colonialism, as a system, sought to ensure that the oppressed do not become critical and independent thinkers, but are rather perpetually dependent on the coloniser. Fanon being aware of this, is of the view that under such conditions, black self-consciousness cannot be said to be "free" as European existentialists tend to assume. For, black being is here, essentialised, *sui generis*, and reduced to objecthood. This is evidenced by his assertion in *Black Skin White Masks* when he remarks that through colonisation, "I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else... 'Sho' good eatin'" (Fanon [1967]2008, 84-85). It is thus, for these reasons that Fanon finds Sartrean existentialism limiting in understanding black human existence and black alienation in particular. This is because, the racial element attendant to the alienation of colonised cultures ensures a certain endurance of their alienated condition which does not arise in the ontological phenomenology of Sartre, for instance.

Furthermore, much of the disagreement between Fanon and Sartre relates to the centrality that the latter places on ontology in seeking to understand human reality. It should be remembered that Sartre terms *Being and Nothingness* 'a phenomenological ontology' while Fanon, on the other hand, shows a distrust for ontology as he cautions that "Ontology—once it is admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man"

([1967]2008, 82). Our view is that Fanon is correct in this regard. This is because ontology as the study of being, occludes understanding being in its entirety with its varying permutations, particularly from a historical point of view and therefore elides the investigator from seeing the past as operative in the present. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger (1996) forcefully argues that in seeking to understand the being of *Dasein* as an entity, it is important to consider that it is always laden with its past, that is to say it *is* its past³. This is because, Heidegger wants to understand time as a *horizon* in terms of temporality. This means that temporality itself must be understood within this lens, as a function of the time horizon, and time constitutes a horizon for the understanding of being. However, we observe that ontology as the study of being, tends to concern itself instead, with notions of stable or well-adjusted human beings and this, as we have noted, elides the historical or the ‘time horizon’ of the present. To this Gordon (1995, 10) has the following to say “Affective adjustment under racist conditions — [and the idea of] a ‘well-adjusted slave’— is an obscenity”. The obscenity here also relates to the condition of a well-adjusted white supremacist individual qua ‘superior’ being. Richard Pithouse (2005), an attentive scholar on Fanon, concurs with Gordon’s explication of ontology when he observes that ontology “has no credibility as a mode of investigation into oppression when it takes the being of the oppressed as the problem, because the problem lies within the structures of oppression and complicity with them, and not the being of the oppressed” (2005, 10). Further reiterating the point, Baldwin avers that:

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that [you] carry it within [you], are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that [you] do (Baldwin, cited in Yancy 2017, 5).

Such sentiments underscore the point that being cannot be investigated or understood in isolation from its past or history; for it is that same ‘past’ that has brought it into existence. It is these concerns that make Fanon to be apprehensive of ontology and to Sartrean ontological analyses. But unfortunately, he cannot escape from it altogether; for as one who also employs phenomenological investigations, Fanon is made to return to ontology since he cannot “reject the existential phenomenological impact of what he ‘sees’” (Gordon 1995, 10).

³ Similarly, *Dasein* carries or possesses that which is its past as it projects itself into the future, towards becoming itself.

It is notable however, that on the question of Being, Fanon is generally in agreement with Sartre and Kierkegaard, particularly on the question of the dualism of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. This notwithstanding, he nevertheless *initially* questions whether the notion of an assumed freedom of self-consciousness *holds* particularly when extrapolated into the situation of the oppressed as made possible by the positing of the for-itself as ‘non-being’ or nothingness in Sartre’s system. Notably, although Fanon questions the applicability of Sartre’s thesis on the freedom of consciousness as extrapolated to the humanity of the oppressed under conditions of servitude, he is nonetheless ultimately made to accept it to be so. For how else would the struggle for liberation and recognition be possible? This, notwithstanding, he sees the totalitarian posturing of such systems as colonialism, Jim Crow, apartheid etc. as social systems that systematically deny the oppressed of their being-for-themselves that is taken for granted in Sartrean and Kierkegaardian ontology. This is because of the fact that within colonial structures, black being is collapsed into the reductionism of ‘colour’ and the caricature of ‘the Negro’. According to Fanon, this is tantamount to black humanity being collapsed and confined to the realm of being-in-itself. Moreover, if being-for-itself is synonymous with human reality as Sartre maintains, we can see in Fanon’s analyses that the black subject is denied the very essence of being human. He or she is ‘walled-in’ as a consequence of the colour of his or her skin. This is the condition that defines ‘the zone of nonbeing’ that the blackness subsists in. Although this is not a zone that escapes presence in the phenomenological sense of black bodies ‘not being there’, it is an ontological absence in the sense of being rendered invisible and not being recognised as a moral agent. This lack of reciprocity, of being denied this being-for-itself is what Fanon understands by alienation. Further, from the manner in which we have located Fanon within existential philosophy and thought about Being in particular, alienation thus arises for him, more concretely, as colonial despair. The notion of black existence as being in a state of despair can be found throughout his oeuvre although this is more evident in his first work *Black Skin White Masks*. While this is so, it is in no way close to the extent to which Kierkegaard treats the notion of alienation as our proceeding discussion shall demonstrate.

According to Kierkegaard (1980), despair is telling of the sickness or corruption of Spirit. It can be characterised by the profound experience of feeling trapped between life and death; alive but not completely alive but not dead either. Essentially, therefore, this is the peripheral zone between being alive and being dead. It is also a zone in which Spirit is tormented by the unrest emanating from a life that has been rendered unbearable and the desire, on the other hand, for its termination, yet death itself becomes impossible. Death symbolises the end of life; the opposite of life. For instance, when a terminally ill patient loses all hope for life, he or she hopes for death as a solution. So, when all hope of life has been

lost, death becomes the next hope. Thus, death, which is the termination of life, becomes the only hope of being delivered from the misery and existence rendered unbearable. It puts an end to life and the suffering that accompanies it, yet in despair, the despairing person lacks this very capacity. This is the central tenet of the concept of despair in Kierkegaard. To this effect, he asserts that “To be sick unto death...is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death” (Kierkegaard 1980, 18). Thus, another qualification of despair is impotence; in that, although the despairing person desires death, death itself becomes impossible.

Generally, the Being of a human being is such that even when faced with the most profound adversity, he or she nevertheless chooses hope over despair; life over death. However, when one is faced with extraordinary danger and suffering or lack of self-realisation, infinitude turns into a desire to die. What transpires from the explication above is that the problem of despair lies in a contradiction of sorts, in that, whilst the individual desires death, death itself does not only become impossible but also continually converts itself into life so that the individual experiences what Kierkegaard calls “to die death” (1980, 18).

To a significant degree, the concept of despair as it arises in Kierkegaard resonates well with Fanon’s analysis of the situation of the oppressed. For Fanon, however, the question of despair brings to the fore the notion of suicide and associated mental illnesses among the colonised and the oppressed. Fanon’s reflections on the question of suicide is directly related to the feeling of despair. He addresses the notion of suicide in *Black Skin White Masks* in the middle of a heated philosophical interchange with Hegel (1977). And although Fanon addresses himself to Hegel, this has implications for the way in which suicidal tendencies arise in Kierkegaard, to whom suicidal desires arise from the Spirit’s failure to realise itself in the world. For Fanon however, it becomes a phenomenon arising from the privation of the categories of possibility attendant to the situation of oppression.

So while Fanon begins by addressing himself to Hegel on the question of suicide, he at the same time, anticipates Kierkegaard’s treatment of it in relation to despair. In Hegelian dialectics, recognition is something that emerges from the process of struggle. This is because he regards recognition (and freedom) as fundamental human qualities and as such, worth staking life for. It should be noted here that Hegel is writing with the European context in mind while Fanon, on the other hand, wants to extend these to the situation of the racially oppressed. He like Hegel, thus wants to conceive of recognition and freedom as human qualities and values that are also applicable to colonised people insofar as they are also desired by them. This is because, colonialism as it depersonalises the

‘non-whites’, simultaneously deprives and denies recognising their humanity such that the decision to engage in an armed struggle, according to Fanon (1967), speaks to the desire by the oppressed to have and possess recognition and humanity which now they are willing to die for. For example, the theory of violence that arises in the chapter ‘Concerning Violence’ in *The Wretched of the Earth* is demonstrative of the willingness by the oppressed to risk life in order to realise these objectives.

However, despite the willingness by the oppressed to die for the attainment of freedom, there are those in the Western world who are of the view that blacks, or as he puts it, “Negroes never commit suicide” (Fanon [1967]2008, 170). The underlying assumption is that blacks do not commit suicide because they do not have the moral capacity or apperception to realise the horror of their existence. M. Achille is one such thinker that Fanon cites as holding this view ([1967]2008, 170). Furthermore, Fanon has Richard Wright citing a white character in one of his stories saying, ‘If I were a Negro I’d kill myself’ ([1967]2008, 170). All what this means is that, the white person’s apprehension of the oppressed, is such that the latter have a high tolerance for suffering and can submit to the most horrid and nightmarish existence “without feeling drawn to suicide” (M. Achille cited in Fanon [1967]2008, 170). But as is shown in this article, this cannot be further from the truth.

This notwithstanding, Fanon wants to conceive of despair which is a condition that *may* lead to suicide—not only as something that may afflict both white and black bodies, but also as a universal phenomenon. This is demonstrated by statistics that show black suicide cases to be higher than those of their white counterparts in the United States of America. In the two cases that he cites he observes that “The Detroit municipal hospital found that 16.6% of its suicide cases were Negroes, although the proportion of the Negroes in the total population is only 7.6%” (Fanon [1967]2008, 170). Again, he notes in Cincinnati that “the number of Negro suicides is more than double that of whites” (Fanon [1967]2008, 170). My citation of these cases is not intended to show suicide as a good or a socially acceptable phenomenon, but that the impotence that despair engenders lead some members of the oppressed to want to commit suicide. Moreover, the intent is to show suicide to be a universal human phenomenon to which blacks, too, are prone. Through these cases, Fanon, like Anna Cooper, wants to show that blacks, too, suffer like the rest of humanity. So it is not the case that blacks readily resort to suicide but on the contrary, what Fanon wants to demonstrate is that suicide remains a possibility, too, for a black self-consciousness. His overarching concern, as is demonstrated in his oeuvre, is to show the evolution of black consciousness as it arises from the zone of non-being towards the attainment of a fully realised humanity and dignity.

It is thus arguable that in Fanon's construal, the systematic depersonalisation of the black person on the grounds of racial difference immanent within anti-black social environments was unique in comparison to other forms of oppression. This is so in the sense that colonialism does not only exploit but also dehumanises those it marginalises. Setting his sight on Sartre, he opines that:

Though Sartre's speculations on the existence of The Other may be correct (to the extent, we must remember, to which *Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness), their application to a black consciousness proves fallacious. That is because the white man is not only The Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary (Fanon [1967]2008, 106).

From this quotation, it can be concluded that it is a misnomer to regard the black-self as the white man's other; and this aggravates alienation.

In Fanon's thought, the humanity of the oppressed is something that is assumed. This is the reason why both as an activist and as an intellectual, he advocated for the dissolution of the system of oppression both in Africa and abroad. Oppression on the basis of racial difference, makes colonialism to be unique in the modern period. For, what is at issue is not merely the domination of one group as has happened in other historical epochs or perhaps as happened among the European countries during the two world wars. This is because, over and above this is the reality of dehumanisation which colonisation has brought about in the lived experience of the colonised cultures. In Europe, as it were, some nations have historically dominated and colonised others, but the dominating country still observed the humanity of the dominated as a people and as human beings. For instance, "under the German occupation the French remained men; under the French occupation, the Germans remained men" (Fanon 1967, 201). However, as history shows this has not been the case in the colonial encounter. Here, whole groups of people are deemed inferior and therefore dehumanised not on the grounds of differing political views, but simply because they are deemed to be different.

At another level, Fanon conceives of black alienation metaphorically as a form of existential incarceration under colonialism. This can be gleaned by an analogy of alienation as a kind of amputation or imprisonment. But this is not merely corporal imprisonment or perhaps physical amputation but more significantly, a transcendental seizure and an arrest of what is possible. This is so for the reason that colonialism does not merely crush the body of the oppressed subject; but by some kind of perverted logic, it simultaneously crushes the black subject's spirit or *Geist*. In this way, it reduces the ability of the latter to rise against his/her alienated condition. Under such conditions black self-consciousness is not

thought of (by Fanon) to be free or to be *a lack*, but turns out to be some kind of existential imprisonment or amputation of the possibilities of both the body and mind.

In the chapter ‘The Fact of Blackness’, the metaphor of existential imprisonment is further explored. Here Fanon finds an analogy between a white amputee and the black subject. There is here, a sense of victimhood and privation that he finds in both. For whatever the circumstance, the amputee is robbed of a chance and possibility of utilising his/her limbs in a similar way that the black is deprived of all sense of normality. In this we can see that if alienation as described by Sartre manifests as a lack, for Fanon, the black person suffers alienation doubly: firstly, as physical oppression or ‘amputation’, secondly, as the denial or perversion of the categories of possibility. This imprisons the colonised subject into the colour ‘black’ with all its acquired prejudices. Thus, it is averred grudgingly: “What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood” (Fanon [1967]2008, 85). This is not a self-inflicted suffering like that of a masochistic. On the contrary, this suffering is something that is forcefully imposed. Elsewhere, Fanon laments this existential imprisonment asserting that “I did not want this revision, this thematisation. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together...nothing but a man” (Fanon [1967]2008, 85).

Gibson (2003), an eminent scholar of Fanon’s work, further provides insight on the black body’s crippled phenomenology in anti-black social environments. He corroborates the metaphor of the black body as resembling the situation of an amputee, in that, in both “there is a degree of collapse of bodily projection” (Gibson 2003, 25). However, Gibson is quick to point out that even here there are significant differences between the two in terms of their social statuses. That is to say, even though the amputee may be discriminated against and objectified, he/she may, as Gibson observes, escape such objectification by using prosthetic limbs. On this basis, he/she *can* renegotiate the “subject-object relationship between the body and the world” (Gibson 2003, 26). The black body, on the other hand, is simply denied this very possibility; for, the black is “wholly determined by an Other” and locked within his/her blackness, “*qua* Blackness” (Gibson 2003, 26). Thus, because the black is wholly determined by the Other through the absoluteness of his/her skin colour, he/she is on this basis, prevented from re-establishing a subject-object relationship like the amputee; because “one” as Gibson notes “cannot hide how one is seen by an Other” (Gibson 2003, 26).

It is important to caution, however, that although Gibson (and Fanon) emphasise the question of the black person being “wholly determined” on the basis of his or

her skin colour, there are, in fact, other physical characteristics that can evoke prejudice. These may include such things as gender, height, age and body size among others. For instance, a blind person does not 'see' colour but may use accent as a way of discriminating against other persons. Furthermore, when children play together they often do not notice skin colour as they must be 'taught' to see it. So, although both Fanon and Gibson are correct on the question of the black person being determined on the basis of racial difference or skin colour, other features may also prove determinative. One may perhaps, understand the reason why Fanon puts tremendous emphasis on skin pigmentation and this is due to the fact that colonial society itself takes skin colour as a criterion to distinguish between a civilised person and an uncivilised one. Furthermore, Gibson and Fanon are more concerned with institutionalised racial discrimination as opposed to interpersonal discrimination. What are the implications?

Implications

The implications for Fanon are clear; institutionalised racism is almost total, affecting various facets of the individual's social life. Furthermore, the implication for Fanon is that the notion of the freedom of consciousness is here questioned or at least 'suspended'. As Fanon ([1967]2008, 103) puts it, under such conditions "black consciousness is held out as an absolute density, as filled with itself, a stage preceding any invasion, any abolition of the ego by desire". Furthermore, in social systems, such as colonialism and apartheid which militate against black self-realisation, black self-consciousness is made not to see itself as a lack, but as an end in itself; hence, it is averred: "My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*. [Instead of being an agent of historical progress] it [becomes] its own follower" (Fanon [1967]2008, 103). Posited in this fashion, black self-consciousness possesses no capacity for transcendence, it is immanent within itself. "I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place in me" (Fanon [1967]2008, 103). It is these concerns, this social reality that lead Fanon to questioning Sartre's thesis of the freedom of consciousness, particularly when extrapolated to black being.

Similarly, Biko (1978) understood and recognised very well the nefarious intentions of the colonising race and the colonial project in colonising the mind of the oppressed. He realised just as Fanon did, that despite physical oppression, there is also a concerted effort aimed at oppressing blacks mentally in a way that militates against the latter from calling into question colonial social contradictions and which prevents the black subject from imagining a better society. As we have observed thus far, what is at issue is the institutionalisation of racism and oppression such that it matters little whether a black person has a

white friend or not and regardless of how strong the bonds of that friendship may be. Mentally enslaved, the black subject is circumvented from imagining himself/herself in a positive light. This is why Biko (1978, 68) would lament that “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed”. Here it is clear to see that by dealing with the mind of the oppressed, the oppressor seeks to discipline the ‘natives’ from within in addition to physical policing. Moreover, enslaved in this manner the black is stripped of his/her inner subjectivity and becomes only an empty shell or object that only exists to advance the ends of his white oppressor. As Biko further notes, deprived of his or her subjectivity, the oppressed becomes like “an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine” (1978, 68). It is thus with such concerns in mind that Biko, after Fanon, begins emphasising the need for cultivating black pride and the elevation of black consciousness.

In a hostile context that militates against black human existence, blackness simply recedes not only into invisibility but also into anonymity. The phenomenology of being socially invisible is narrated by Fanon through his own experiences in metropolitan France while he was a student at Lyon and notes here that when he put himself out there into the world, he found no response from the Other, there was no recognition. This denial of reciprocity means that while he occupies space, he at the same time, was “not there, disappeared” and overcome with “nausea” (Fanon [1967]2008, 84). This means that beyond the feeling of inferiority that the black will endure, s/he will at the same time endure a feeling of invisibility. The denial of reciprocity leads to a deep sense of nausea and helplessness and, in a word, leads to despair. Natanson’s (1979) account of how alienation in society arises as a result of social anonymity or the socially ‘invisible’, has echoes of Fanon’s idea of despair.

For Natanson (1979), our knowledge of others is mediated by what he refers to as ‘the anonymous’. There are accordingly varying degrees of anonymity and the way we come to know someone or groups of people, depends on which side of the anonymous divide they happen to reside. As he puts it: “to a greater or lesser degree, our knowledge of others who are at a distance from us is mediated by the anonymous” (Natanson 1979, 534). Following Schutz (1962), Natanson takes the view that this mediation involves a process of typification by which human beings organise and grasp the world, events and the people in it (Natanson 1979, 534). Essentially, this typification process is twofold and involves firstly, observing the type of action that produced the act and then deducing from the action the type of person that must have acted in this way; secondly, it involves the opposite of the first which entails knowing the personal ideal type and then deducing the corresponding act (Schutz in Natanson 1979, 537). Thus, for both Schutz and Natanson, typification is at the heart of knowing in general.

What is of concern for us is the manner (according to this view) in which an individual or a group of people become socially marginalised or alienated. For Natanson the answer lies in his idea of a “We-relationship” (1979, 541) which typification implies. Accordingly, our knowledge of others transcends the temporal here and now grasp of otherness. On the contrary, it is one that is rooted in the idea of the primordial unity of being.

As such, it presupposes not only the historical horizon we have of an individual but also the future which predictively gives us clues on what we are likely to know about them. The implication thereof is that recognition of any kind results from what we may associate with that person or thing. Thus, “all acts of recognition are rescues of identity and specificity from the anonymous ground of presence” (Natanson 1979, 542). What transpires from this view is that alienation results from the reality of being cast outside of the We-relationship. This is not difficult to see because there are cultures or groups cast outside of the margins of society or the norm. This phenomenon, as is argued here, emanates from the fact of being untypified. Natanson further observes that “alienation arises because the constructs of typification remain completely and utterly withdrawn from the We-relationship...” (1979, 544)⁴. Furthermore, alienation becomes the “destruction of the social—the negation of typification” (Natanson 1979, 544). It can be gleaned from the foregoing that for Natanson the concept of the anonymous sheds important light on how alienation from society results from the annulment of typification as well as being structured outside the We-relationship. Notably, Natanson’s conception as regards alienation is by and large similar to Fanon’s conception of the alienation of blacks as structured outside of humanity and stripped of all human recognition.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore and understand the philosophical concept of alienation as understood by Fanon. To this end, it was noted that the dominant commentaries on the concept in Fanon, read alienation mainly in socio-economic, psychological and cultural terms. It was however, argued that philosophical analyses also features prominently in Fanon thought on the concept. To this end, an argument was made for a reading of the concept in existential and therefore, philosophical terms. Having examined how alienation arises in the existential thoughts of both Sartre and Kierkegaard, it was shown that such explanations prove inadequate as analyses of the alienation of colonised cultures. Furthermore, the apprehension of the oppressed in terms of skin colour

⁴ In *What Fanon Said*, Lewis Gordon (2015) posits the concept of *perverse anonymity*, which means an extreme case of being nameless. It is a situation that would result from the phenomenology of being overdetermined from without; pages 49-50.

frustrates the possibility of becoming insofar as self-realisation is systematically thwarted. Reduced to mere colour, the black body is accordingly deemed (in colonial society) to have no interiority, reason, soul and no subjectivity. The denial of black subjectivity and the apprehension of the colonised in terms of skin colour, to use Sartre's term, denies blacks of 'non-being'. Thus, the determination of the colonised in this fashion necessarily produces a feeling of despair.

As was noted, central to the alienation of the oppressed is the situation of racial difference. But as observed, this aspect does not exactly form part of Sartre and Kierkegaard's analyses. As such, for these thinkers there does not necessarily exist an external or socio-political structure militating against the self's attempt at self-realisation. Thus for these thinkers, alienation arises fundamentally as an ontological lack which as we have observed, is a fact of a free self-consciousness. For Fanon, on the other hand, alienation is conditioned or impacted upon by the historico-political situation of oppression which denies black people of their freedom. The notion of despair as it arises in Kierkegaard was at some length, discussed and it was noted that there are similarities in the way in which despair manifests in his thought to that of Fanon. In its manifestation, despair is a phenomenon that gives rise to suicidal tendencies. Thus, since for Fanon the problem of despair and the tendency to commit suicide arises within the colonial context, alienation for him becomes a problem of colonial despair. Despair then, becomes the overall manifestation of alienation. The anguish that results there from discloses that, 'determination' is not complete as the coloniser would like to believe. And since the determination of the black body by the coloniser is not absolute, the implication is that the oppressed can, at least, be able to imagine a different political and social state of affairs other than that which is presented by colonialism. Moreover, although Fanon is initially sceptical of Sartre's thesis of the freedom of consciousness insofar as it relates to the colonised, this is in fact what he takes from Sartre, the notion of the freedom of consciousness. For it is thus that freedom becomes possible at all.

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