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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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The Philosopher's Stone

November 11, 2016

Philosophical Discussion Group

Volume 19, Number 3

Come hear the Funk on November 17th @ 4pm in G 107

Putting the Funk Back in Philosophy's Philo: Cornel West on Love, Democracy and the Blues

By Luke B. Higgins (luke.higgins@armstrong.edu)

Of all the stereotypes that most readily come to mind when describing philosophers, "funky" would most likely be pretty far down the list. Brainy? - check. Head-in-the-clouds? - check (that one goes back as far as the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes, whose comic depiction of Socrates in his play, *The Clouds*, apparently brought down the house). Some combination of bearded and grumpy? -check. But FUNKY? Uh... Well, anyone who thinks philosophers can't find their funk clearly is unfamiliar with philosopher and public intellectual, Cornel West. West is brainy, yet deeply grounded in life as lived. He's bearded but far from grumpy (he's always got a hug in reserve for anyone who asks). Drawing as much from literature and music as philosophy, West's philosophical engagement is about as far removed from the stereotype of the dispassionate rationalist as one could imagine. Combining the backbeat of a Bootsy Collins bass-line, the soaring lyricism of a John Coltrane sax solo, and the spiritual gravitas of a late Beethoven string-quartet, West encompasses a full jazz orchestra of ideas and expression all in one person. If nowhere else, then perhaps you caught his cameo in the *Matrix* trilogy—films partly inspired by his work.

Rooted in a number of traditions including (but not limited to) American Pragmatism and Martin Luther King Jr.'s prophetic politics of love, West lives out a version of the philosophical life that is closely engaged with

the dark and painful yet also joy-giving finitudes of human existence. For West, any philosophy that doesn't deal with the grit and funk of life (think here about the sweat and stench of physical birth and death) is too highly abstracted from lived experience. Philosophy's job is to equip our souls not for some idyllic afterlife or detached contemplation of forms, but for the work of existence as lived "from the womb to the tomb.": "Philo-Sophia—love is a meditation on and preparation for death. Not just death as a physical event... but mustering the courage to critically examine yourself, so when you let a certain assumption go, that's a form of death... You must learn to die if you're going to undergo deep education as opposed to cheap schooling."

For West, this deep education is hard earned: It requires us to wrestle with the brutal history of a nation founded not just on the institution of slavery but on the systematic extermination of its native peoples. "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness... finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism." West goes on: "The blues knows because the song is an action. It's recognition of the death shudder, a naming of the pain. That's the way in which a song of despair is not despair."

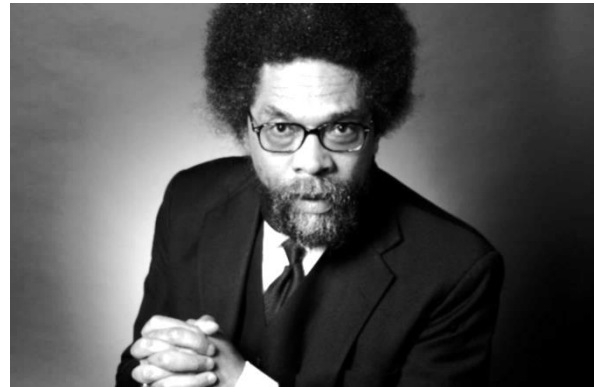
In the wake of this past week's shocking turn of national events (yes, I'm talking about the election), many of us who count ourselves among the "lovers of wisdom" are in need of some new ways to engage productively with despair—what West might call the "funk of

human history.” We’ve watched as our leaders-to-be and their supporters fail to uphold even the most basic standards of truth-telling. We’ve witnessed what amounts to the American public’s full endorsement of an individual who has openly espoused racist and misogynistic (what I like to call serving your sexism up with a twist of hate) attitudes. For some—though certainly not all—of us, these events represent a banishment of the American political imagination to the deeper and darker recesses of Plato’s Cave. Indeed, when it came to democracy, Plato himself liked to warn his contemporaries of precisely these kinds of dangers. For Plato, these risks were precisely what disqualified it as a viable political system—democracy can turn to demagoguery at the drop of a hat. Well aware of these risks, West chooses instead to highlight democracy’s rare promise: That somehow we might affirm the moral status of all individuals (black or white, women or men, educated or non-educated) along with a commitment to civic duty—a choice to actively care for the structures that sustain our common life. For West democracy is both precious and fragile. It is easily broken, also something worth sacrificing for.

What does democratic justice have to do with the love of funk? Everything according to West; for democracy is impossible without some basic commitment to empathy—a willingness to not just feel, but respond to another person’s pain, to courageously face up to the funk of our co-humanity. Over this past election season this capacity seems to have been uniquely lacking, not just among Trump supporters but also among elitist progressives who refused to see anything other than bigotry and ignorance in the frustrations of those drawn to Trump. West reminds us that empathy, the condition for democracy, is itself conditioned by our capacity for love. Which brings us back around to putting the funky philo back in philosophy: Given the way philosophy is often practiced in the academy, we can easily forget that philosophy’s roots lie

not in a logos but rather a *philein*—a love-for, a passion, a hope. West reminds us that love of wisdom must go hand in hand with loving one’s neighbor and sometimes even one’s enemy. For love is impossible without a *making-ourselves-vulnerable-to* the Other. In short, love is dangerous. Love is funky. And love is worth sacrificing for. Reminders to help buoy up our spirits up at the end of a long, wearying and disheartening election season.

Join us next Thursday, Nov. 17th in Gamble 107 at 4pm for pizza, philosophical conversation and—if you need it—commiseration. We’ll kick things off by watching a 20 minute video “mash-up” of various Cornel West interviews and lectures set to the jazz masterpiece “A Love Supreme” by the John Coltrane quartet.



The Funk from Cornel West

“You must let suffering speak, if you want to hear the truth.”

“We’re beings toward death, we’re ...two-legged, linguistically-conscious creatures born between urine and feces whose body will one day be the culinary delight of terrestrial worms.”

“The country is in deep trouble. We’ve forgotten that a rich life consists fundamentally of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. We need the courage to question the powers that be, the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people, the courage to fight for social justice. In many instances we will be stepping out on nothing, and just hoping to land on something. But that’s the struggle. To live is to wrestle with despair, yet never allow despair to have the last word.”