

# James Baldwin on Racial Progress Without Redemption

Kneller Lecture

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Let me begin by saying how honored I am to have been invited to give this year's Kneller Lecture. I would also like to thank A.G. Rud for the invitation and Amy Shuffelton for serving as a commentator on my remarks today. And, of course, I must thank all of you for allowing me to join your conference, the Philosophy of Education Society conference. This is an extraordinary privilege. Finally, thanks must be given to all the invisible labor that makes these events possible.

Now I find myself these days, more so than usual, pessimistic about the future of this country. I suppose I'm not alone. The currents of Trumpism have seized the nation and Democrats, at least as I read them, seem ill-prepared to respond. In one of its forms, Trumpism is simply racial resentment. It is a sense that racial progress comes at the expense of white Americans—that racial progress isn't about redeeming society, but reinscribing harms, now directed toward white Americans. There is more to this, to be sure. But one response, we see it today, is not to confront our racial past, but to deny it. We refuse to acknowledge, as Abraham Lincoln thought we must, that “we cannot escape history.”

I've been looking for resources—resources that can help me understand not so much Trumpism, but our tendencies (whether one is on the political right or the political left) to seek racial redemption through our politics. This tendency of ours is dangerous. Even among the best of us, the tendency gets in the way of us doing right by justice—by democracy's demand that we honor the freedom and equal standing of our fellows. Our illusions and evasions, the false safety that comes with the assertion of our specialness or our idolatrous elevation of the purity of a past that never existed, will always present our vices as virtues and in doing so deform both us and the nation.

It is in this context that I turn to two figures: the Swedish sociologist

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Gunnar Myrdal and the American novelist and essayist James Baldwin.

In turning to Myrdal, I want to understand the dominant model of racial liberalism that defined the second half of the twentieth century and, what I shall want to call, its deformed aspirational politics. We see it popularized in powerful form in Myrdal's 1944 work, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*.<sup>1</sup> In that work, he deploys liberalism's commitment to freedom, equal regard, and social justice to address racial inequality.<sup>2</sup> From the 1940s to the 1960s, racial liberalism shaped social, legal, economic, and political engineering in the United State. Myrdal is a representative example of a way of thinking about the country's history of racial discrimination and its quest to realize a just society. In *An American Dilemma*, we find a "once-born" liberalism, with little place for sin and tragedy.<sup>3</sup> To speak about him as I do is to get at his aspirational politics and the underlying attitude informing his vision; it is an attitude of evasion. It is the very same attitude that is with us today.

Against the backdrop of Myrdal, I focus on one of the most critical responses of the period—the thinking of James Baldwin. His writings captured the public imagination and shamed the political establishment as the black freedom struggle was coming clearly into view in the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

I turn to Baldwin because in him, we find an attenuated aspirational politics, born as it was from seeing both the promises and the betrayals of the United States.<sup>5</sup> In his writings, we discover his confrontation with the irrevocable deeds of white supremacy, and yet the necessity of responding to it all the same because, alas, we are responsible for the communities we inhabit. To call it irrevocable is to focus on the soul-scarring character of white supremacy, for which, as Baldwin says, neither he "nor time nor history will ever forgive."<sup>6</sup>

So, I reach for Baldwin in these Trumpian times because I think his attention to the scarred soul of the nation gives us a better understanding of ideas I hope we still care about (even if we are confused about how to understand them) today. Ideas such as identity, history, and the ethical themes of responsibility, forgiveness, redemption, and atonement. If Myrdal offers us an

attitude of evasion that is still with us, Baldwin offers us an attitude in which we must be critically responsive to history.<sup>7</sup> Being critically responsive, I hope to persuade you, comes with a great deal more.

### RACIAL LIBERALISM AND THE ONCE-BORN SOUL

Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* represented a major statement on race and inequality when it was published in 1944. The Carnegie Corporation, who commissioned the study in 1938, doubted that Americans could be or would be objective when it came to race. So, they selected the Swedish economist Myrdal, who had already established himself as an intellectual. He in turn enlisted some of the most gifted scholars of race in the fields of history, sociology, economics, and political science.

In the study, Myrdal embraces a specific kind of moralism latent in American culture. He opens and closes the massive study (parts 1 and 11, respectively) by framing the problem of racial inequality in terms of the crisis of moral commitments among whites and their betrayal of what he calls the American Creed. This remains the most enduring part of the study. The politics of the day and for several decades thereafter also drew support from the study.<sup>8</sup>

The framing matters. The decision to structure the book in the way he did shapes how we ought to understand the underlying ideological commitments of the United States, the history of racial disregard, and the status of white Americans in addressing the problem. The book aspires to tell an origin story about who Americans are. Origin stories do important existential work for those who subscribe to them. Because origin stories often transcend time, they permit us to rediscover a primordial national moment. Here, at ground zero of the nation's life, we discover the polity's true commitments. Hence Edward Said tells us, that origin stories have a "divine, mythical and privileged" character that "dominates what derives from it."<sup>9</sup> Origin stories are powerful precisely because they are thought to be about fate.

It is unsurprising then that Myrdal begins, in the very first chapter, with the "origin of the American Creed."<sup>10</sup> Behind racial inequality in the United States, he wants us to believe, we discover a true community that beck-

ons us—a vision of American identity in its pure form.<sup>11</sup> That pure identity is one that is committed to freedom and equal regard—a creed that says that everyone is worthy of respect and the opportunity to chart their own course in life in a way that is consistent with others' ability to do the same

The pure form of American identity and Myrdal's religious belief that American democracy is fated to win the battle against white supremacy bring to mind William James's classic account of the once-born soul. Admittedly, Myrdal only invokes James once in *American Dilemma*, and even there he is not referencing James's 1902 work. So why reach for James's text? I want to suggest that the heuristic of the once-born soul best captures Myrdal's brand of liberalism. Heuristics are mental shortcuts that economize our thinking and when they are about the world, they declutter the landscape. But they can be too neat. And that is the problem. I am suggesting that the American Creed declutters the landscape, and behind it is the once-born soul.

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James distinguishes between two ideal types: once-born and twice-born souls. He acknowledges that most of us are of a mixed variety, but what is of significance is that these different types of souls embody different attitudes toward life. The first-born has a healthy-minded attitude and often "looks on all things and sees that they are good." In the "systematic variety" of healthy-mindedness, it "selects some one aspect of [the world] as [its] essence for the time being and disregards the other aspects."<sup>12</sup> To resist humanity's constant struggle and violation of its own highest image, the once-born consistently retreats to an affirmative feature of human life and claims that feature as humanity's essence. In contrast, James says, the twice-born soul sees both the light and persistence of the dark features of human nature. "The doctrine of the twice-born," he explains, "hold[s] as it does more of the element of evil in solution—is the wider and completer" view. James's point is not that the once-born soul cannot acknowledge evil, but it factors as an anomaly in human life and thus the once-born is prevented from accepting evil as a durable feature of human nature.<sup>13</sup> As he says of the once-born: "the world is a sort of one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the values which naturally they appear to

have.” The once-born lives on the “plus side” of life.<sup>14</sup>

The textual echo of the once-born lives in *An American Dilemma*, but to notice it we must track Myrdal’s description of the problem. In the introduction, he captures the heart of the issue:

The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on. This is the central viewpoint of this treatise. . . . at bottom our problem is a moral dilemma of the American—the conflict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

White Americans are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, they believe in freedom and equality, which defines the American Creed. Yet, on the other, there are a variety of prejudices against African Americans that betray the Creed. For Myrdal, each white American carries within their breast this tension, and it dogs their psyche and wreaks havoc on the external community in which black people live. Although Myrdal notes that there “are no homogeneous attitudes . . . but a mesh of struggling inclinations,” he maintains that the American Creed is the “morally higher and true” value that directs political society.<sup>16</sup> This is Myrdal isolating what he takes to be the essence of the American polity, as the once born often does.

He treats the history of racial domination as an aberration within American life and thus sets about the task of educating the citizenry to their true commitments. Myrdal partitions the past between those features that “truly” convey American ideals and those that reflect anomalies within the national identity. This is why he says, “in principle the Negro problem was settled long ago.”<sup>17</sup> For him, the scope of freedom was clear, and the conditions of equality were properly understood, but the application was limited.

### INNOCENCE AS CRIME

Myrdal’s text is not merely descriptive; it articulates a normative aspiration. His elevated notion of our national identity whispers, even today you

can hear it, to our soul like ministering angels and comforts the heart. So, it is unsurprising that *An American Dilemma* became a text not only for the academic but for the layperson as well, as abridged versions were produced for the policymaker and student alike in the 40s and 50s. And there is a contextual sensitivity at work in the text that anchors the reader. *An American Dilemma* is filled with examples, both interpersonal and structural, of white supremacy and black domination. But they inhabit the text in a particular way and shape how the nation should think about its identity amid racial disregard.

Ultimately, narrating the *American Dilemma* works by fragmenting not what we remember but how we remember it. The past flows away from us into the gutter of our horrible deeds, giving us the impression that they form no part of our shared identity—that they do not touch the nation’s soul.<sup>18</sup> The details of the past are called forth and seemingly shape the present. But Myrdal sequesters them, allowing Americans to say in the 1940s, as we so often say today: “That is not who we are.”<sup>19</sup>

He encourages his readers to take comfort that the vision of life on display in the 1940s is not theirs. He sanctions the thought that the prejudices that constrained black life are not also of America’s will. Ever on the quest for an unsullied political identity, Myrdal ironically deforms our way of seeing the full picture of our humanity. In that deformation, he leaves us less than human—less responsive to our shared, even if tragic inheritance and less attuned, as a result, to the sources of racial injustice.

At precisely this moment, we can hear James Baldwin’s worry two decades later in his 1964 essay “The White Problem.” “What is most terrible,” Baldwin writes, “is that American white men are not prepared to believe my version of the story. ... In order to avoid believing that, they have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, [a system that] is about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense.”<sup>20</sup>

When Baldwin talks about the system of evasions, he often talks about it as Americans’ insistence on their innocence. He uses innocence throughout

his work to diagnose Americans' refusal to face their racial history. His use of the word "innocence" functions as a tool of political and epistemic analysis.<sup>21</sup> Innocence denotes attitude and point of view, which, as Baldwin argues, infuses the cultural field of the United States and shapes the outlook of white Americans. Innocence involves closing one's eyes to others in their historical particularity to affirm an alternative and false reality. What precisely is that false reality? He names it in that same essay of 1964:

The people who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't . . . anything else but a man; but since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he was not a man. For if he wasn't, then no crime had been committed. That lie is the basis of our present trouble.<sup>22</sup>

We will return to the language of "fatal flaw," but we should pay attention to something else for the moment. Here, Baldwin detects the attitude of evasion.

To confront black pain and death involves acknowledging something about one's community. Acknowledgment shatters illusions, something that Baldwin argues is a difficult even if necessary thing for a society to do. Here is the difficulty: "The danger," he tells his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*, "in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of reality."<sup>23</sup>

Behind this remark is Baldwin's ongoing confrontation with identity as a form of estrangement and deformation. If he tries to enable black people to see their white counterparts, he also seeks to describe to white Americans the illusions that grip them and the costs. So, his preoccupation with identity is also a call for his fellows to be suspicious of how they think of themselves. Estrangement is about how the meaning of American identity evades the re-

ality of historical inheritance. When white Americans narrate the meaning of the Civil War, Reconstruction, the civil rights movement, or the election of the first African American president, these stories function as instances of the nation's latent commitments manifest—the power of America's origin story righting the course of events.<sup>24</sup> These moments in American history are not interpreted, as Baldwin would encourage us to do, as deep criticisms of and tensions within the complicated identity of the nation. For that reason, the nation does not interpret them as departures from the Founders' commitments. They do not, in other words, show us a scarred nation attempting to be born again.

Deformation of our ethical capacities (the “moral sense” as Baldwin refers to them) results from estrangement. He argues that the intensity of one's attachment to the innocence of American life matches the ease with which one abdicates responsibility for the communities to which one belongs. “People who imagine,” he writes a year later (1965) in “The White Man's Guilt,” “[that] history flatters them are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.”<sup>25</sup> Our ethical capacities matter not merely because they make us attuned to the world, but also because we find our ability to remake the world in that very attunement.

There is a striking implication Baldwin asks his readers to consider that recasts the political goals of the United States: As a form of estrangement, American identity evades democratic freedom. His picture of freedom isn't novel. From the 1830s through the 1940s, African Americans pushed against domination, but they also tried to get the nation to embrace what we might call a non-sovereign understanding of freedom. Freedom requires cultural and institutional support and thus requires one to be seen or taken in a certain way to complete freedom's meaning—that is, the ability to pursue one's plans of life without fear or threat of being subjected to the use of arbitrary power. We are inescapably dependent on each other to realize freedom. But dependency involves vulnerability, potentially revealing the inadequacies or limitations of the identities on which we rely. However necessary, freedom turns out to be a hard thing to bear for those that claim innocence.<sup>26</sup>



Here is the rub, and however obvious it may seem we must never tire of saying it and encouraging each other to accept its truth: The things to which one must attend do not disappear because we close our eyes, and the inherited costs display themselves in the form of reinscribed harms that demand a response. This point of view gives us a different take on our narration of American history. Reconstruction, the civil rights movement, or even Black Power were not merely sites of transformative possibilities but the manifestation of repressed trauma haunting the present.<sup>27</sup>

### RESPONSIBILITY AND HISTORY

So, what do we do? Well, nothing short of a rebirth is required—a reawakening by embracing the nation’s trauma as also what the nation is. Baldwin’s plea is that Americans assume a different attitude, critically embrace their past, and allow both to structure a collective vision of responsibility. But just as Myrdal’s view involved a picture of innocence against which Baldwin railed, I want to suggest Myrdal’s view also involved a narrow conception of responsibility inadequate to the fullness of history. Baldwin offers us more.

But to see it, I want to take you to a scene in American history. Before an audience in 1963, Baldwin, Nathan Glazer (American sociologist), Sidney Hook (philosopher), and Myrdal gathered for *Commentary*’s symposium, “Liberalism and the Negro.” *Commentary* is a monthly magazine founded by the American Jewish Committee in 1945, quite popular and important by the 1960s, by the 1970s it shifted toward neoconservatism.<sup>28</sup> The symposium was subsequently published in 1964, marking the twentieth anniversary of Myrdal’s study. The symposium took stock of America’s progress on the nation’s most significant dilemma.

One immediately notices that Baldwin stands apart from America’s liberal defenders. The focal point of tension is not between Baldwin and Myrdal as one might have anticipated (at least not explicitly) and not between Baldwin and Glazer as most scholars discuss. The heart of the disagreement is between Baldwin and Hook.

Behind Hook’s critical engagement with Baldwin is a broader concern

about the role of history in thinking about ethical and political life. Hook tells the audience that the ethical principles of American life (that is, the principles of the Declaration of Independence) must guide the citizenry. He concedes there is much to do to improve the life and standing of African Americans, but he insists there is little doubt that the nation has made and will continue to make progress. Then he directs his ire toward Baldwin: To argue otherwise about the nation, as he claims Baldwin does, is to “paralyze our ethical impulses.”<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the exchange, Hook seems more consistent with Myrdal than Myrdal himself. He leans into an ideological defense of liberal democracy that is indistinguishable from his appreciation of the United States as an ethical republic. To him, Baldwin looked more like the social protest novelist Richard Wright, and Hook had already criticized him (and others) in 1949 for pushing negative ideas about the United States.<sup>30</sup> This ideological context and Hook’s politics of vindication shaped his attitude toward the past in thinking about racial justice and his account of responsibility:

Those people in the South are not responsible for the initial acts which developed the situation in which they find themselves. ... They can be charged with responsibility for not playing a greater role, for not taking a more active part in the political process. But there’s a tremendous difference between responsibility for a problem which we run away from and collective guilt for the crimes of racists.<sup>31</sup>

We should observe two issues. First, as Hook says elsewhere, he conceives of the “Negro problem” as a problem for black people that is in need of being fixed by those with whom they share society. This gives a specific character to the issue at hand: the problem inheres in the situation of African Americans (it is the “Negro problem”) and thus Hook takes the background conditions for granted. We do not, in other words, treat the problem as a feature of the historical development of American institutions and as something for which we must take responsibility.<sup>32</sup> This leads to the second observation. In Hook’s thinking, we can discern the outline of what Iris Marion Young refers to as a

liability model of responsibility. We must be able to assign culpability to agents causally tied to consequences for which responsibility is sought.<sup>33</sup> This leads him to suggest in the passage above: They were racists then, we are not now, and our responsibility extends no further than the actions we in the present have committed. History remains, but its role is diminished, lest we endanger human agency and social transformation.

If the American Creed is a once-born faith because it has little space for lasting anguish and little patience for the specters of the past, Baldwin's account is very different. Baldwin argues that the way to a new America must run through the trauma of black life—a twice-born faith in James's sense that does not remit the nation's failures but holds promises and betrayals clearly in view.

Baldwin famously alerts his readers to this in *The Fire Next Time*, which I briefly referred to earlier. This line can find no home in Hook's 1963 remarks: "This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of [black] lives."<sup>34</sup> Destruction not only happened, but it continues anew. Destruction is happening today.

To speak as he does indicate that Baldwin is not merely interested in us recalling past events. "It is not a question of memory," he explains in 1955. "The man does not remember the hand that struck him," Baldwin insists, "the darkness that frightened him as a child; nevertheless the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight."<sup>35</sup> To stand in an intimate relationship with the past requires us to acknowledge how it shapes the ground of our identity and the practical judgments that work themselves into the world through our words and deeds.

The foundational role Baldwin accords the past is likely to make us nervous. There is an Old Testament sensibility in his writings in how failures in history come to weigh on the present. And worries over guilt or blame swirl about us when asked to see ourselves as responsible for the past. In our

contemporary moment, I am reminded of Republican senator Mitch McConnell's response to reparations for slavery in 2019: "I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea."<sup>36</sup>

For a society preoccupied with innocence and that thinks of responsibility always through a liability model, Baldwin will appear to be asking us to take the fall for something we did not do and over which we had no control. We heard it in Hook, and in Baldwin's famous exchange with the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead in 1970 we can hear it again. Baldwin asks her to think about our connection to each other across time and how our past may bind us. To that suggestion, she responds: "I think if one takes that position it's absolutely hopeless. I will not accept any guilt for what anybody else did. I will accept guilt for what I did myself." The reason, she continues: "If we can't control it, we're not guilty."<sup>37</sup>

Despite Baldwin's claims, he is not interested in blame or guilt. "I'm not interested in anybody's guilt," he writes in 1964, "I know you didn't do it, and I didn't do it either."<sup>38</sup> To Mead's concern he says, "But I'm not trying to make us guilty."<sup>39</sup> Similar to Hook and Mead, Baldwin is after responsibility, but not of the liability kind. "But I am responsible for it," he continues, "because I am a man and citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too."<sup>40</sup> The "it" here is the racial nightmare of American life that functions as a shared inheritance.

At just this moment, Baldwin's insight shines through, but it requires us to keep the connection between dependency and democratic freedom I mentioned earlier in view. Freedom denotes dependency, the necessity of a socio-institutional ecology (that is, the *demos* in its collective capacity) that creates ethical and political conditions for completing one's freedom. In that case, the lack of a healthy ecosystem that produces and reproduces injustices will prevent freedom's realization. For Baldwin, we should not think of this as merely a structural-institutional problem because reproduction also lives in us—in our habits and sensibilities. When these institutions are at work, they create an environment of identity formation that also bears our stamp. They

reflect and reproduce who we are. The reproduction of racial injustices across time requires a corresponding capacious idea of responsibility to match. What Baldwin is after in his writings we find nicely stated by Iris Marion Young: “shared responsibility is a responsibility I personally bear, but I do not bear it alone. I bear it in the awareness that others bear it with me; acknowledgement of my responsibility is also acknowledgement of the inchoate collective of which I am a part, which together produces injustices.”<sup>41</sup> Our racial history thus requires that we view responsibility as also something we can share, even when we cannot causally see such acts of injustices flowing from our will.

So, Baldwin thinks we awaken our responsibility by holding the nightmare in view. Hook suggests otherwise. Hook thinks the American Creed can only survive by releasing it from its burdens.<sup>42</sup> This is what a great many of us think today.

Hook and Myrdal were uninterested in asking the questions that Baldwin thought we must ask: How should we stand to the irrevocable deeds of white supremacy? What is the fate of responsibility in a democratic society given the brutal racial history of the United States? What is left of aspirational politics if the past always haunts the present?

#### THE SENSIBILITY OF THE TWICE-BORN: FAITH WITHOUT REDEMPTION

I have sketched a point of view that Baldwin asks us to assume. It involves us rejecting the idea of our racial innocence to accept the fullness of our past. This is what it means to be critically responsive. In doing so, we are also positioned to embrace a form of freedom adequate to meet the demands of our shared democratic life. With this comes a corresponding robustness to our view of responsibility, what I have called a shared idea of responsibility.

There is one lingering issue to address that has to do with the weightiness of our history. It comes in the form of the very notion of an irrevocable deed I mentioned in the introduction. For if deeds are irrevocable, and their consequences seem to extend into the present, it is not clear why one would ever attempt to respond. One might worry that how Baldwin asks us to think

about the past threatens to endanger the very notion of aspirational politics. His claim in *The Fire Next Time* that the country's crimes against black people are something for which he nor time nor history can ever forgive or his insistence in "The White Problem" that the act of enslavement was the country's "fatal flaw" seems to deny transformation. The reason we are likely to think this is because of how we have historically envisioned politics. For if aspirational politics holds out the possibility of change and progress where racial justice is concerned, it must be because the nation can redeem itself through politics. Progress, we so often think, must imply salvation.

I ask you to think about the matter differently. To take Baldwin seriously requires us to disentangle transformation and progress from redemption. This is not, my colleagues, a tactic and it isn't a program; it is an attitude or mood that nurtures democracy and tries to sustain the citizenry for an incomplete, and dare I say, perhaps incompletable journey.

"I don't think," Baldwin says to Hook in that roundtable discussion, "we can discuss this [the ethical character of the nation] properly unless we begin at the beginning."<sup>43</sup> When he asks us to return to the beginning and the weightiness of our past, he asks us to think of the nation as Josiah Royce once thought of an individual that wrecked their moral universe. Here is how Royce put it in that extraordinary text of 1913, *The Problem of Christianity*:

In his own deed he has been false to whatever light he then and there had and to whatever ideal he then viewed as his highest good. Hereupon no new deed, however good or however faithful, and however much of worthy consequences it introduces into the future life of the traitor or of his world, can annul the fact that the one traitorous deed was actually done.<sup>44</sup>

For Baldwin, the deeds are the enslavement of black people and the corresponding hierarchy of value we call white supremacy. He cannot absolve white Americans of a deformation they initiated in the nation's name, and this point holds even as he encourages his nephew to "accept them with love."<sup>45</sup> Baldwin asks his black audiences to love white people, but he also thinks this goes a long way

in unburdening black people with responsibility for saving their white counterparts. Love is powerful, but the work of civic love always requires partners<sup>46</sup> The love from black people may point the way to accepting one's past and is therefore important in that regard, but until "they understand [their history], they cannot be released from it."<sup>47</sup> Time and history cannot serve in that role either. Although they are useful in marking the temporal distance from one's beginnings, they cannot dissolve the inherited consequences of those actions.

To be released from the past or forgiven for it (these things mean the same for Baldwin) is not the same as absolving one of the horrors that the past represents in time. In his conversation with Mead, he refers to this as "the dynamic that exists in time."<sup>48</sup> Those deeds are irrevocable and seeded the ethical and political life we now live and share. To this thought, Mead recoils: "Then we've nowhere to go."<sup>49</sup> But we run into a problem. It now appears that Baldwin has seemingly traded in one origin story for another, that in abandoning the optimism of the American Creed he has embraced pessimism. No, he says, because "we have atonement."<sup>50</sup>

To atone is to engage in reparative work; it orients the soul as one undertakes the work of correction, of improvement, of development. An atoning community looks backward to the beginning that has given life to the harms, is perceptually attuned to how the harms ripple through time, and engages in ameliorative actions so that those in the future may live more humanely in the light of their past.

In this way, atonement gives a specific meaning to our present actions in redressing racial inequalities and injustices that contrast with the language of redemption. Redemption would aim to restore that which was broken and deliver us from the harms that follow as a result. To be, for example, redeemed through Christ is to be delivered from one's sins. Christ on the cross is a powerful and rich image; it represents the emptying of the self in the form of sacrifice for humanity thus releasing us from our sins. Baldwin, however, does not invoke Christ in this role to address the tragedy of America's racial history. There is no narrative of escape, no redeemer, and no metaphysical certainty guaranteed to us by our origin story. And with this, Baldwin dispenses with

the idea of redemption.

We must do the same; it will give our democratic aspirations a more realistic grounding.

As it stands now, our quest for national absolution through our politics is simply destructive.

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2 I do not mean this in the sense that Charles Mills has in mind when he invokes the term "racial liberalism." For his account, see Charles Mills, "Racial Liberalism," *PMLA* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1380–97.

3 Here I liberally appropriate the language of "once-born" from William James. See William James, "Lectures IV and V" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902)

4 "Dixie's Hesitation Waltz: You Lead, We Might Follow," *Variety*, May 29, 1963, 3.

5 A great deal has been written on Baldwin, and as of late. For those with whom I share the most and have learned the most from in thinking about Baldwin, see Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University



Press, 2000); George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), chap. 4; Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), chap. 5; Nick Bromell, *The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 3; Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire Is Upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in American* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown Press, 2020); John E. Drabinski, "James Baldwin: Democracy between Nihilism and Hope," in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, eds. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 481–96.

6 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 292. All references to Baldwin's works will be from this collection (CE) unless otherwise noted.

7 My idea of "critical responsiveness" moves in a different direction than William Connolly's more famous iteration of the term, although I don't think my use of the term is incompatible with his. See Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

8 See Southern, Gunnar Myrdal and *Black-White Relations*, especially chaps. 5 and 7; Jackson, Gunnar Myrdal and *American's Conscience*, 210–11; Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (1994): 1043–73; Leah N. Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), chap. 1; Morey, *White Philanthropy*, chap. 10; Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). For another important angle on the growing conservative bent of analysis on race and the use of Myrdal in this regard, see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

University Press, 1997).

9 On the distinction between “beginning” and “origin,” see Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), xii–xiii; see also 372–73. On beginning as a structural theme in Baldwin, see Glaude, *Begin Again*.

10 Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, lxxxviii (emphasis added).

11 Here I borrow this term from Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 51–55.

12 James, *Varieties*, 101.

13 James, *Varieties*, 531; “but provisionally and as a mere matter of program and method, since the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones, the philosophic presumption should be that they have some rational significance, and that systematic healthy-mindedness, failing as it does to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope” (*ibid.*, 185).

14 James, *Varieties*, 185.

15 Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, lxxix.

16 Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, lxxx.

17 Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, 24. In the same context, he refers to the “century-long lag of public morals,” by which he means that the practical norms underwriting institutions and actions were out of step with the higher values of the American Creed.

18 In her insightful but brief review Margaret Jarman Hagood captures the point very nicely: “After more than a thousand pages of critical appraisal of our culture and behavior ... [Myrdal] ‘makes up’ by expressing great confidence in America’s future role as the most powerful white nation and in the inherent goodness of American people.” *Land Policy Review*, 7, no. 3 (1944):

31 Relatedly, Jeanne Morefield explores how this is not merely a feature of domestic liberalism but also part of its imperial logic. See Jeanne Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), introduction.

19 See generally Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, vol. 2, appendix 2, 1035–64.

20 James Baldwin, “The White Problem” (1964), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 95.

21 Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said*, 27–29; see also Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 143–50.

22 Baldwin, “The White Problem,” CE, 91.

23 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 294.

24 Baldwin did not think black people were immune to the force of the origin story but given the distribution of power he was less concerned about this. See James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1971), 34–35.

25 James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt” (1965), CE, 723.

26 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), CE, 135. To this we should add the striking passage from *The Fire Next Time* where we now see that to be divested of a crutch is to court death: “Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have” (339). Baldwin’s preoccupation with identity is twofold. I have discussed the first as it relates to an American identity, but something, even in passing, must be said about the second. The United States’ evasion of freedom is a species of a primordial problem for Baldwin. This issue relates to his philosophical anthropology. In *Notes of a Native Son*, he puts the matter this way: “But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—

that is, accept it” (18). Contained in our humanity are forces of good and evil, and the problem of American identity is a manifestation of this fact.

27 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

28 “Liberalism and the Negro: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Commentary* 37, no. 3 (March 1964): 25–42.

29 “Liberalism and the Negro,” 34.

30 Sidney Hook, “Report on the International Day against Dictatorship and War,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 7 (1949). Baldwin was also critical of Wright but from a very different angle. By the 1960s, he came to see something of the truth in Wright’s criticisms of the United States. On this point, see Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, CE, 11–18; Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, CE, 247–68.

31 “Liberalism and the Negro,” 38.

32 The character of my critique is owed to Tommie Shelby’s idea of the medical model ameliorating social problems. See Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 2–4.

33 Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97–104.

34 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 292.

35 Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, CE, 23.

36 *Washington Post*, June 18, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mcconnell-says-hes-against-reparations-for-slavery-it-would-be-pretty-hard-to-figure-out-who-to-compensate/2019/06/18/9602330c-9205-11e9-b58a-a6a9afaa0e3e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mcconnell-says-hes-against-reparations-for-slavery-it-would-be-pretty-hard-to-figure-out-who-to-compensate/2019/06/18/9602330c-9205-11e9-b58a-a6a9afaa0e3e_story.html).

37 Baldwin and Mead, *Rap on Race*, 166.

38 Baldwin, “Words of a Native Son” (1964), CE, 713.

39 Baldwin, *Rap on Race*, 166.

40 Baldwin, "Words of a Native Son," CE, 713; see also "Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour: A Conversation with James Baldwin and Colin MacInnes" (1965), in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 52–53; Baldwin and Mead, *A Rap on Race*, 56.

41 Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 110. In connecting Baldwin and Young as I do, I am under no illusions that this will settle matters. Students of policy will likely raise many complicated and empirical questions. The point here is to get us to see that whether we can suggest that there is something like historical racial injustices will depend on the point of view we assume when thinking about responsibility.

42 Saddling Hook with the total weight of this view of the American Creed minimizes his complexity. His early 1947 Commentary essay "Intelligence and the Evil in Human History" and his 1960 American Philosophical Association address, "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life," suggest a different mode of engagement than was on display in 1964. Still, this is not the argumentative path he takes when engaging Baldwin. See Sidney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); see also *Political Power and Personal Freedom: Critical Studies in Democracy, Communism and Civil Rights* (New York: Collier Books, 1959), especially chaps. 6–8. For helpful, even if conflicting interpretations of Hook, see Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 114–24; Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 17–28.

43 "Liberalism and the Negro," 27.

44 Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1913), 161.

45 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 294.

46 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 346–47 (emphasis added).

47 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 294.

48 Baldwin and Mead, *Rap on Race*, 163.

49 Baldwin and Mead, *Rap on Race*, 164.

50 Baldwin and Mead, *Rap on Race*, 164.

51 Jesse McCarthy, *Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul? Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021), 234.

52 Baldwin, “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity” (1962) in *The Cross of Redemption*, 50.