

# **Institutional Ethics, Forty Acres of So-called Morality and Still No Mule By J. W. Wiley**

## **Introduction**

In his essay, "The Concept of Race," W.E.B. DuBois (1986) stated,

"I saw the race problem was not as I conceived, a matter of clear, fair competition, for which I was ready and eager. It was rather a matter of segregation, of hindrance and inhibitions, and my struggles against this and resentment at it began to have serious repercussions upon my inner life"(p.649).

What DuBois saw as unfair competition, segregation, hindrance and inhibitions, still to this day permeates the institutional walls of academia and directly contributes to the devaluing and demise of professional and academic careers. The fact these injustices affect some more than others is not right, just, or ethical. The fact that institutions aren't cognizant of situations like these or choose to ignore them complicate matters even more. It is not enough to promise forty acres and a mule and only deliver the forty acres, nor is it enough to promise forty acres and a mule and only deliver the mule. While all promises can't be kept, some shouldn't be made if they aren't going to be kept. As a result of this, in the halls of major universities within the U.S. there is enough acreage for the seeds of morality to be sown, but nowhere is there shelter available to house those mules.

An extremely volatile, albeit covert dynamic within academic institutions is the affectation of an ethic that arguably reflects these institutions. For the purpose of this essay I refer to this dynamic as institutional ethics. What this essay will reveal is what I mean by the rubric, institutional ethics. This essay shows how institutional ethics are representative of a unification of the traditional ethical positions, normative and descriptive ethics. I articulate the inconsistencies within an institutional ethic and its impact on any critical mass of Black Americans endeavoring to achieve a voice within institutional walls. Therefore I answer questions on how an insufficient institutional ethic thrives and permeates every facet of academia and how the utilization of applied ethics contributes a perspective that aides in the eradication of ethical dilemma.

My articulation of the concept of institutional ethics is an analysis of the morality of academic institutions. I assess, in terms of incorporating Blackness and otherness, what institutions "ought" to do, what their deontological responsibilities are and the validity of their judgment on what in their so-called rules are right and wrong. More specifically, I evaluate assumptions on minority behavior vs. the so-called legitimacy of non-minority behavior. I look at the ethics of diversity decisions and ponder non-existent entities like Black privilege within predominantly White institutions juxtaposed against the reality of White privilege. I examine the rationale and ethical implications of faculty hiring along traditional ethical positions. Lastly, I examine the moral injustices heaped on the "other" when expectations of "representing the race" become more paradigmatic than plausible.

## **Forty Acre Promises and its Ethical Implications**

Ethicists embrace divergent opinions on what the primary focus should be of ethical inquiry. Ethical investigations usually incorporate assessments and notions of what our duty is in a given situation, what we ought or should do, what is the responsible thing to do, etc. However, the study of ethics is also concerned with the meaning of moral statements and the plausibility of demonstrating the truth or falsehood within those statements.

Most ethicists could be construed as trilingual. This is largely due to the three primary forms of language that comprise ethics. The language of descriptive ethics informs us about the type of lives people live and the moral choices that are made within those lives. Normative ethics addresses ideas of rightness, justice, choices people make, and the rhyme and reason, value and rationale

involved in those choices. Meta-ethics is the study of the meaning of moral statements as opposed to the contents of the discourse. So, a statement like one used by DuBois (1986) claiming “Prostitution is world old and inevitable” is indicative of a descriptive statement in that it states an obvious fact (p. 649). “Prostitution should be legalized to better legislate the parameters that surround it” is a normative statement about the merits of societal supervision or governance on an illegal activity. “Prostitution is simply not right” is an example of a statement that a meta-ethicist would assess by first determining what is implied by the “rightness” of the statement, can the rightness or illegality of prostitution be objectively arrived at, and are there any facts involved in the statement.

Rebelliousness against traditionalist notions and capitalist assumptions of what is the greatest or most significant area to research in the field of ethics are more common place now than in the past. That may be a result of the reality of disenfranchised groups in this country. Conventional applications of ethics never seemed to truly engage the important issues of marginalized constituencies. Applied ethics, as defined in Moral Philosophy, is the study of controversial ethical issues like racism, abortion or euthanasia (Moore and Stewart, 1994). Applied ethics attempts to determine what general ethical principles apply to these morally relevant issues, which can then help us decide similar questions about our own unique situations (McInerney & Rainbolt, 1994). Applied ethics covers such fields as business, medicine, engineering, journalism, the ethics of intimate relationships, and the ethical dimensions of particular public policy areas, such as race relations and famine relief. As a part of moral philosophy, applied ethics has flourished over the past two decades and demonstrates the implications of normative theory for specific moral issues and descriptive ethics for decisions made regarding concrete circumstances.

Black people, Mexican people, and Third-world people who are mired in the struggle of owning a piece of the American dream often don't have the luxury of lounging about staring at the stars. Neither do the collective masses often recognize the subterfuge and nuances that moral injustices have situated upon them from their historical heritage. Of all the different ethical focuses available for man to undertake, only a practical and applied ethic capable of producing a more immediate result would suffice in terms of addressing the transgressions of history. Ethical theory applied to the machinations of an academic institution manifests itself in rewarding revelations for all parties involved.

The ethical implications of an activity like prostitution may be a disconcerting example to enlist as a segue from the introduction of this essay to the core of its context. However, an interesting paradox exists in the parallel of an individual consciously acquiescing to being exploited for profit under the auspices of a so-called benefactor. Bracketing the sexual implications of prostitution, is prostitution not the psychological manipulation of special and not easily attainable services for a price? Accepting that as true, a point of departure between the street-walker, and other social misfits, the abused housewife, the marginal entertainer, and the underrepresented academician can be that society has taken the liberty to designate one of them unacceptable for its sexual impropriety. The abused housewife endures all types of social ills from an abusive husband to ensure that his economic protection doesn't diminish. Marginal entertainers, desiring that breakthrough opportunity, prostitute themselves by taking jobs that they normally wouldn't take. Academicians also allow themselves to be relegated to opportunities that mortify them personally but fortunately, allow them to begin paying back their graduate student loans.

Beaches are often painted an array of colors without affecting the interpretation of them as beaches. Classic and ageless stories are told many ways without disturbing the moral of the message. The crux of this assessment of institutional ethics needs to also be seen one way. It is important to recognize that severe dues often must be paid before success is achieved. More so, without those dues, successes or progress often would go under appreciated. This doesn't mean that events like American Slavery and the Holocaust were necessary to elevate the consciousness and character of Blacks and Jews. However, it does mean that a thin line exist between the housewife's bedding down her husband to keep a roof over her head and the head of her children and a prostitute turning tricks as a means of employment, even though he is reporting to a pimp. Stated more concisely, **on some level everyone turns a trick from time to time, only our remuneration can vary widely.**

### **In Search of the Proverbial Mule**

Does an academic institution have an ethic by which it must adhere? Should an academic institution have an ethic? I submit that the answer to both questions must be yes. The necessity of an academic institution adhering to an ethic is somewhat mandated by federal law and institutional policy. Directives like those ensuring the adherence of affirmative action practices force institutions to play by the rules, thereby guaranteeing a certain degree of ethical implementation within academia if these academic institutions desire to continue to receive federal funding.

The yes to the question "should an academic institution have an ethic?" should not be interpreted as an obvious answer to a rhetorical question. While the term "should" serves the literal purpose of providing within the statement an auxiliary functionality of obligation, the weight it carries is much more burdensome. Should an institution project an ethic if it doesn't intend to stand by it? Does an institution have an ethic if seventy percent of the faculty don't adhere to or believe in that ethic? What percentage of the faculty must support an institutional ethic before the ethic becomes legitimized or valid? If fifty-one percent of faculty supports an institutional ethic, is it then validated as the institutional ethic of the institution? If the president and provost of an

institution, its prime leadership, strive to establish and maintain an overriding morality, is that sufficient enough to claim that the university itself has an ethic?

The answer to all these questions is subjective at best and fleeting at worst. The answer is subjective because no matter how dynamic the leadership and what percentage the supporting faculty are, in terms of implementing ethical initiatives, the question of ethical behavior can always be answered from a personal perspective. If the goal of an institution is to develop a reputation for serious research, the meta-ethical question then becomes what is meant by serious? Terms like serious are often utilized as implements of control to categorize and then marginalize those that fall outside of the categorization. Serious research should not be exclusive of non-traditional research interests of marginalized groups. There is room for an articulation of non-traditional interests. English and History programs that endeavor to represent a broad scope of American Studies need to recognize the impossibility of the project without inclusion of the narrative discourses of underrepresented and marginalized groups like Black and Latina Americans. Management and Philosophy programs need to understand that the scope of their respective missions is global in terms of marketing and knowledge and therefore must be inclusive of voices that historically have been ignored. Mathematics and Science programs need to separate themselves from the illegitimate rationale that there is no method of including diversity into their curriculum until they have at least taken the initiative to recruit and hire diverse faculty who might be better equipped to develop a curriculum that reflects, if not appropriating, diverse perspectives.

The answer becomes fleeting when you consider that the institutional ethic must hinge on the leadership of the institution. It all starts with leadership that is firm in its conviction and prepared to put its money where its mouth is. If the president and provost are trusted, well respected individuals, then their formulation and direction of the institution's agenda will be implemented from moral ground and directed towards even higher ground. Change agent's can infect others with their enthusiasm and zeal and it doesn't take many. Malcolm X (1964) once said **"But just as the fuse is the smallest part or the smallest piece in the powder keg, it is yet that little fuse that ignites the entire powder keg"**(p.274).

A more significant question is what are the elements that contribute to an institutional ethic? **A normative ethic within an institution establishes codes of behavior. A descriptive ethic within an institution articulates these codes.** It is the intertwining of these two that forms the fundamental ethic needed to permeate every action within the walls of an institution. However, it is the utilization of applied ethics that specifically allow an assessment to be made about the merits of an institution's ethical implementation. In addition, awareness that an institution is only as ethical as its most unethical practice helps.

DuBois, renowned for his scholarship and his seminal work on racism, was a major contributor to the development of Applied Ethics. This is evidenced in his articulation of the four classes of reasons usually given in defense of race antipathy. DuBois (1914) identified racism as a function of a survival instinct brought on by something repulsive; a self-defense against undesirable traits of another culture; a method of race development, and a method of group specialization. Essentially what DuBois articulated is that race antipathy is a result of the way we are socialized. This socialization process is consistent with the way we develop our perspectives of value, right

and wrong. DuBois explicated the four classes a bit further by identifying them as “a method of maintaining the European level of culture.” It is in the non-cognitive, socialized sense that an ethic can become corrupted. The socialization process that everyone undergoes is something that we often must remind ourselves of. DuBois (1986) himself said,

It is hard under such circumstances to be philosophical and calm, and to think through a method of approach and accommodation between castes. The entombed find themselves not simply trying to make the outer world understand their essential and common humanity, but even more, as they become inured to their experience, they have to keep reminding themselves that the great and oppressing world outside is also real and human and in its essence honest. All my life I have had continually to haul my soul back and say, “All white folk are not scoundrels nor murderers. They are, even as I am, painfully human”(p.650).

DuBois’ cautions us to attempt to understand that it is our humanity that contributes more to our falling prey to unethical practices. So no one should be too quick to cast dispersions on others. Remember, if not for the grace of god...

### **The Impact of Institutional Ethics on Communities Within**

Within all academic environments are communities clamoring for a voice in the proceedings, a presence at the conference table. How ethical is an institution that ignores the fact that it isn’t providing enough opportunities to its disenfranchised communities, thereby pitting them against one another for table scraps. At many universities in the country this appears to be the case and it occurs in many forms. Black and Latino agendas for advancement in an institution find themselves clamoring for the same dollars that have been earmarked to go to an ethnic group. Communities that endeavor to promote an egalitarian agenda in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation find themselves having to develop arguments about why their interests should be the most prevalent concern of the academy.

**The fact that at many institutions there is only one person of color on the administrative staff or in a faculty unit only heightens the sense of nihilism for that employee.** Consider the fact that in your area of expertise or profession your research is designed to address one specific community. Because you may be Black, you will not have just Black folk approaching you for support, but Mexicans/Chicanos, Asian-Americans, Gays & Lesbians, because it is assumed that your experiences must have made you sympathetic to the plight of other disenfranchised groups. That is normally an accepted situation. But, assuming you are also an extremely competent professional or professor, (which you will have to be to even get the job), then you can anticipate having a constituency of non-underrepresented individuals as well who would like your support or assistance. This actually is a major problem at many universities. A White professor that appears to be very accessible will never have to deal with the proliferation of protégés that approach an underrepresented professor because 1) the White professor isn’t the only game in town and can afford to say no, 2) The White professional or professor often wasn’t reared in an environment where non-support of one of your own is likened to denying your heritage or even worse, acting like an Uncle Tom.

The Uncle Tom phenomenon, including having the designation attached to you, is taken very seriously within the Black community. While it also has often been used as a mechanism of manipulation, it is entrenched in Black heritage and when possible, is avoided at all costs. Malcolm X (1964) spoke on it this way.

A few hand-picked Uncle Tom, handkerchief-head Negroes are given big jobs in Washington, D.C. And then those Negroes come back and try and make us think that the administration is going to lead us to the promised land of integration. And the only ones whose problems have been solved have been those hand-picked Negroes (p.281).

It is imperative that institutions recognize that part of their moral responsibility is to anticipate problems like this happening and do something about them. **Both supervisors and academic departmental chairs of traditional departments are smart enough to recognize that having one person representing an entire gender in a work environment can be somewhat disconcerting.** No woman wants to be the only woman in the men's locker room. No gay person desires to be the only homosexual in a heterosexual conversation. No person of color needs to be the sole representative for all people of color in an academic institution. The wants, desires, and needs of marginalized and underrepresented people aren't necessarily the ethical responsibility of academic institutions. However, it is the ethical responsibility to create an environment that is welcoming and accommodating for these Jackie and Jacquelyn Robinsons that better equip them with the potential to change their respective academic landscapes. If that isn't motivation enough, then simply consider this special assistance I'm speaking about another version of providing Black people their proverbial forty acres and a mule. Also consider it another apology for Japanese people's internment and Native American's overdue compensation for their present invisibility within an American context due to a legacy of lies and broken promises by the American government. And let us not forget the loss of Mexican people's access to opportunity instead of being once again treated as foreigners in a region of the United States that was once theirs to travel within freely.

### **Moral Obligations of Academic Institutions**

Academic institutions have a moral obligation to provide the proper support mechanisms or resources for those existing inside its walls. This translates into students having professors that look like them, new faculty having mentors to help them transition into the institution, and administrators having an opportunity to succeed in their jobs. Of course the possibility of commonality between a student and faculty that resemble isn't assured. New faculty can have someone mentoring them, but if it isn't someone who cares about their success, it is simply someone who is fulfilling an assignment that minimally enhances the possibility of success. Administrators who arrive at an institution having accepted a position framed in a certain light shouldn't have to realize a week into the job that they don't have the budget or the staff they were promised.

With most institutions comprised of predominantly White faculty and White senior administration, the impetus to have a mentor takes on an entirely different flavor for the underrepresented members of the institution. White faculty, students, and administrators come into these environments with a plethora of potential mentors available to them. Whether or not

they connect with them is not the issue. The issue is that, more often than not, more than one mentor is available for them. This shouldn't be misinterpreted as a statement for mentoring along racial or cultural lines. **There wouldn't be Blacks and other underrepresented groups in the academy today without the many White mentors who contributed to our development.** Conversely, just because you and a faculty member share a common color, culture, or creed doesn't necessitate that they will be as passionate about mentoring you as you may be about being mentored. Besides, actually having these resources always available is ideal but not realistic. What is most important is having a plan to constantly obtain these resources.

### **Behavioral Assumptions – They Don't Really Need the Mule**

Years ago as a neophyte graduate student and recently hired recruitment intern, I overheard comments describing someone as moody. Later, I was introduced to an older Black man that I ultimately discovered was the person the comments had been made about. He was one of only two Black males working in an administrative position for the university. My initial impression of him was that he was an individual that truly cared about his students. In addition, as a Black man, he was invested in assisting the progression of his people. His people however were not just Black people, but also marginalized, underrepresented and third-world people. As I became more integrated into the professional ranks of the university he became even more of a mentor and friend. However, the stigmatization that had been attached to him by his colleagues never dissipated. To them, he was always gruff, curt, bordering on rude, and always with a chip on his shoulder. Eventually, this older Black male, **this role model of mine, left the university, without giving notice and without his Ph.D.** Unfortunately, he left while still holding the dubious distinction of being Ab.D. which translates into "all but dissertation." Some conjectured his departure was stress related. Some speculated the death of his mother as the final straw. Others hypothesized a drinking problem. Having inherited some of the responsibilities he once had, I unfortunately could see how he left himself vulnerable. However, as his successor within that same institution, I also saw the possibility of his demise as a factor of something else as well, the burden of being a Black man in American society. Is this a paradox or what privileged people might refer to as African-American paranoia? If it is African-American paranoia does that negate the fact that the embodiment of an ethic within academic institutions often does include an element of racism in one of its many forms?

Michael Eric Dyson (1996, pp. 33-36) suggests that the concept of racism should be separated into three categories, race as context, race as subtext, and race as pretext. Race as context Dyson defines as helping the nation to "understand the facts of race and racism in our society." Race as pretext enables an understanding of the function of race and racism in America. It is his concept of race as subtext, however, which is germane to my assessment of institutional racism.

For Dyson, race as subtext reveals how arguments have been utilized as a means of mystification or deliberate vagueness in regards to racism. It describes the "different forms that racism takes, the disguises it wears, the tricky, subtle shapes it assumes." Dyson states that the understanding of race as subtext helps grasp the "hidden premises", "buried perceptions," and "cloaked meanings" of race as they show up throughout our culture. Race as subtext enables us to see how an institution's inability to incorporate underrepresented people into legitimate positions

with legitimate support systems is difficult not to interpret as a "buried perception" or "cloaked meaning" within some type of subtext.

The popular adage "just because you are paranoid doesn't mean you aren't being chased" could not be more appropriate than when experiencing the "nuances of non-mention" that permeate academia. There is the non-mention of significant relationships that benefit you juxtaposed against relationships that others have that benefit them in their careers. This non-mention takes on another dimension itself when you hear about a conversation that you were absent from which included you as one of those identified as a beneficiary of favoritism or tokenism. There is the non-mention of whether you are qualified for the job by those same individuals that tell you how much respect they have for what you do. There is even the most blatant non-mention, the non-mention of how Black intimidation pervades the very essence of interactions with many of those so-called colleagues. This intimidation is largely due to either an unfamiliarity factor or an epidemic of xenophobia that must precede confident, well-educated Blacks. Colleagues of mine have corroborated the former as a phenomenon and the latter as an epidemic at their institutions as well. I propose a theory that the epidemic usually occurs when the phenomenon of unfamiliarity threatens to undermine the sanctity of white privilege.

How institutional ethics accommodate White privilege within an institution have been a topic of discussion for years amongst underrepresented people, primarily because no discussion on the lack of an ethical agenda for marginalized groups can be undertaken without reference to the hegemonic culture. The extent that white privilege is taken for granted though is astonishing. Many White Americans take umbrage about the privilege their culture, race, and heritage affords them, but the obvious can't be denied. How many all-Black, all-Latino, or all-Gay or Lesbian senior administrations are there in the United States? I would venture to say, with confidence, zero. It is more likely that you will see a senior administration that all stand 6'5" before you ever see an all underrepresented senior administration at any institution that is not historically Black or Hispanic serving. The privileges emanating from senior administrations are only truly ascertained by those that benefit from them. However, I know first-hand the privileges I have benefited from those rare occasions when I have had a Black male mentoring me socially, academically or professionally. Sometimes it is as simple as the immediate concurrence or vicarious feeling of an articulated situation. Sometimes it is as complex as the shared research interests that were inspired for both mentor and mentee by the lived American experience. The question that doesn't go away though is what could be the reason why the phenomenon of an all Black senior administration at a predominantly White institution has never occurred?

The ethics of the situation are evident. **Even a Black president of a predominantly white institution isn't going to hire an all Black senior administration.** I doubt if she would even feel comfortable replacing her disgruntled White staff. The Black president would not subject herself to the scrutiny that she would have to endure. She would not open herself up to the accusations of bias or racism. Yet, while the finger of racism is levied in regard to certain dubious hiring practices, in most cases an eyelash doesn't bat when the senior administration of academic institutions either all stand up to use the restroom or all know they should be applying sun tan lotion on a slightly overcast eighty-degree day.

**The difficulty of ethical choices within academic institutions is not racially exclusive. A Black colleague of mine, faced with a decision to hire someone, was forced to decide between the two remaining candidates, both of whom were outstanding, a Black man and an Asian woman. At the time his entire staff was Black. He was also serving as the director of the diversity office at his university. The implications for him surrounding that hire were problematic. He hired the Asian woman and she proved herself more than worthy in every respect of her professionalism. With hindsight being 20-20 vision, he could reconcile the choice because you never know how the other candidate would have worked out. However, he was left to deal with the irony of the fact that if she hadn't been an excellent choice, he would have not hired the best candidate because he was Black. More to the point, he had been co-opted into doing the wrong thing in an attempt to do the right thing.** Ultimately this situation deconstructed his perspective on hiring, ethical behavior, and ethical decisions. Even though he had made a diversity hire, the turmoil of the decision ensured that he would not be as quick to judge someone for not diversifying his or her staff when given the opportunity. Some larger questions loom with respect to this decision. Because you are Black must you be predisposed to choose Blackness over Whiteness or run the risk of being labeled a handkerchief head Negro? If the answer is yes, then how do we challenge institutions to not hire in their own image?

No certifiable answers are available to the conundrums that exist in regards to the relativistic nature of ethical behavior and ethical decisions. On some level every appointment and termination can be questioned for its integrity and merit. But, if we liken ethics to love, and power to the ability to actualize potential, institutional ethics reductively become an issue of power versus love. Institutions, by their very structure and foundation must have power or they will not thrive. However, imbedded within them must also be an element of love. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King (1967) once said, "What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love"(p.289). How love and power are balanced against one another is often demonstrated in terms of respect, both for the person being treated ethically and the person exhibiting the ethical behavior. If all institutions would couch their ethical behavior in terms of treating everyone as if they were the person in the mirror, respect would be a given and this essay would have been on another topic.

Respect the stranger,  
whose respect of you isn't nice,  
possibly by your actions he might actually think twice,  
and in that process  
find a vast treasure of wealth  
in the beauty of the feeling  
of respecting himself.

-- *J.W. Wiley(1988)*

## REFERENCES

DuBois, W.E.B., (1914). Does race antipathy serve any good purpose? In F.L. Hord & J.S. Lee (Ed.), I am because we are (pp. 247-249). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

DuBois, W.E.B., (1986). The concept of race. In DuBois, W.E.B., Writings. (pp.625-641). New York: The Library of America.

Dyson, M.E. (1996). Race Rules. Reading, Massachusetts; Addison-Wesley Publishing.

King, Dr. Rev. M. L., (1967). Black power. In F.L. Hord & J.S. Lee (Ed.), I am because we are (pp. 285-295).

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

McInerney, P.K. & Rainbolt, G.W., (1994). Ethics, New York, Harper Collins.

Moore, B. N. & Stewart, R. M., (1994). Moral Philosophy, Mountain View, Ca. Mayfield Publishing.

Wiley, J.W., (1988). Respect. In Wiley, J.W., Searching beyond the rhyme, (p.7). An unpublished manuscript.

X, Malcolm., (1964). Speech on "Black Revolution." In F.L. Hord & J.S. Lee (Ed.), I am because we are (pp. 272-284). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.