Chapter Five

Coolness between Virtue Ethics and Aesthetics

Cool a Virtue?

It has been shown that, historically, coolness stands for two things: at the time of slavery and residential segregation it functioned as a protective attitude practiced by black men in the United States; and it is a principle of white "Victorian" American culture leading to asceticism and self-control. The present chapter clarifies the relationship between these notions suggesting that in spite of the fact that a part of black cool can be defined in terms as character (or virtue in more classical definitions) black cool implements a supplementary dose of subversive patterns like irony and moral ambivalence that must be scheduled as aesthetic. The aesthetic aspect of black cool covers areas outside the field of ethics and remains irretrievable even by virtue ethics. In the end, black cool cannot be evaluated in terms of good or bad but merely in terms of positive or negative values. This is why it can be better understood with the help of value theory, developed by Ralph Barton Perry and the African American philosopher Alain Locke, than with the tools of virtue ethics.

"Victorian Cool"

As mentioned, cool is not restricted to black culture. In white America, cool flourishes especially in the last half of the nineteenth century among the

Victorian middle class of England and America which attempts to formulate "recommended norms by which people are supposed to shape their emotional expressions" and opinions about how to obtain "calmness and composure of spirit" (Stearns 1994: 2 and 25). This is the birth of Victorian cool. Prior to the Victorian Age, in America, "being cool was considered uncouth by all middle-class codes of conduct" and it was not necessary to be cool "to get middle class girls" (Connor 1994: xvii). Now, however, self-restraint is seen as a source of individualism strongly propelled by the amalgamation of the merchant classes' capitalist values and Puritanism. As a consequence, spontaneity is feared and the Republican ideal of "rational, ascetic, and self-governing individuals" (Takaki 1971: ix) becomes decisive for the formation of an Anglo-American culture that increasingly requires to "repress one's emotions, to think more clearly and to effect a more 'objective' intellectual analysis" (Dinerstein 1998: 253). Finally, cool becomes a principle Republican virtue.

Virtue Ethics, Character, and Values

Because coolness is related to character, the branch of philosophy most interested in an analysis of this phenomenon is virtue ethics. When Marlene Connor says that "black people wanted to be judged by the content of their character" (Connor 1994: 153), this clearly concerns cool as a matter of virtue ethics. The approach of virtue ethics, which examines the good together with a whole palette of values, is distinguished from that of deontology which is about the right and the duty any individual has to follow rules that are right. Virtue ethics is also different from consequentialism or utilitarianism, concepts that are equally concerned with the good but hold that it is the consequences of a particular act that form the basis for any valid moral judgment about that action.

Victorian cool, with its ambition to formulate "recommended norms by which people are supposed to shape their emotional expressions," can sometimes appear as a primary subject of interest for ethics of duty or deontology because Victorian attempts to control emotions often end up with the implementation of rigid, rule-following behavior. In spite of this, Victorian cool should be considered as a virtue in the first place because it has often been conceived as a matter of character. The young Woodrow Wilson said about the prime Republican value: "Such government as ours is a form of conduct, and its only foundation is character," (quoted from Persons 1975: 303). A priori, white cool can be subjected to a treatment through virtue ethics. Black cool is not entirely alien to this approach since a large part of black cool (as demonstrated by Connor's statement) is indeed a manifestation of character and can be defined as virtue. However, there are complica-

tions when it comes to the evaluation of aesthetic components present in black cool, as will be shown below. In any case, it should be noted that the shift from virtue ethics to deontology that can sometimes be observed in Victorian cool when it spells out rules about the right conduct, cannot be found in black cool.

Virtue is best described as moral character. Virtue ethics supposes that a person's character traits are stable and that an honest person will behave honestly in all kinds of situations. Values play an important role here because values, just like desires, emotions, perceptions, attitudes, interest, and expectations, define the disposition of a person's character. Subjective values are for example, truth or honesty and objective values are health or life. Justice and faith are also values, which show that values can fully overlap with moral goods. However, values should not be conceived of as metaphysical entities that are good "as such." Though virtue ethics is normative, it does not speak of values as absolutes, but merely suggests what it believes to be good in a certain situation. Virtue ethics integrates cultural components in its evaluation processes and this has an impact on the definition of values. Values depend on social changes and can be summarized neither in the form of a static rule or principle nor in the form of a metaphysical "beyond" dependent on internal states alone. These are some of the reasons why the concept of virtue has been neglected for centuries and only very recently been accepted as a viable conception for modern times. Alasdair Macintyre's attempts to ground virtues in community life have greatly contributed to this task.

As mentioned, values as they appear in virtue ethics are most clearly opposed to the idea of the right in ethics of duty or deontology. However, this does not imply that virtue ethics is beyond the reach of all enlightenment ideals of universality and that it contents itself with debating moral issues in a purely relativistic fashion. Virtue ethics recognizes that values refer to a variety of possibilities of what can and what should be done and discusses these possibilities on a reasonable basis.

Coolness as a Virtue

At least one explicit attempt has been made to explain the concept of coolness by linking it to that of virtue. Nick Southgate traces cool back to elements present in Aristotle's virtue ethics. In Southgate's opinion, Aristotle's emphasis on qualities like courage, temperance, generosity, wit, and truthfulness clearly introduces an ethics of coolness (Southgate 2003a: 4). Aristotle's classical definition from the *Nicomachean Ethics* establishes virtue

as "a state whereby Man comes to be good and whereby he will perform well his proper work" (*NE* 1106). The achievement of ethical virtue consists in creating a unity of moral aspirations and moral knowledge and Aristotle believes that this is only possible by submitting feelings to virtues. For Aristotle, moral judgments are impossible as long as feelings remain uncontrolled. Virtue cannot be "acquired" like an attribute but the unity of reason and feeling is supposed to form a moral personality (usually obtained through education). Only when we are ethical can we act according to the good.

Southgate sees here a parallel with cool because Aristotle's ethics puts forward the "correct exercises of the reason in accordance with the virtues" (Southgate 2003a: 17), finally leading toward the capacity to behave appropriately in every situation. The interesting aspect of Southgate's proposal is that cool is allowed to appear as a practical virtue not determined by theories and reflection but by concrete practice that helps to reestablish the subject's dignity. Aristotle's cool is "concerned with practical reactions [and] with one's situations, i.e. how to react to the day-to-day indignities of oppression with one's dignities intact" (Southgate 2003b: 458). Here it joins indeed our contemporary cool which "cannot be manufactured" (Gladwell 1997: 10) and which is rather a matter of instinct and not of rules.

Southgate's decision to grasp cool through "virtue ethics" suggest the use of criteria that are concerned neither with the rightness or wrongness of actions nor with its consequences but with the virtuous or good character of the moral agent. Though this makes sense, the problem is that it limits the cool character to virtues such as temperance, generosity, wit, and truthfulness. However, what about the relaxed, smiling face as a symbol of black coolness or what about the mysterious mingling of self-restraint with creativity and seductive power? Can these qualities be grasped as virtues in the sense of attributes of a good character?

Aristotle's concept of cool as a breeding ground of virtues such as temperance seems to be more appropriate for an examination of Victorian America as it is described by Peter Stearns who has been quoted above from his book *American Cool*. Coolness as a rational and ascetic ideal of character is definitely compatible with these formulations of virtue ethics. What Southgate's definition of cool as Aristotelian virtue entirely neglects is the African American dimension of cool. As probably also Southgate would confirm, cool in its current understanding is no longer dependent only on self-renunciation and alienation but appears also—or even mainly—as an "umbrella term for a set of non-European aesthetic values" (Dinerstein: 266).

Can this important emphasis on aesthetics still be grasped through virtue ethics? Or, in other words, can virtue ethics be tuned with aesthetics? Answering this question in the affirmative would suggest that aesthetics is

supposed to deal only with values that are good and virtuous though, in reality, aesthetics considers values of all kinds. As a matter of fact, in Western philosophy the concept of the aesthetic has been explicitly established as a quality independent of moral evaluations.

In principle, aesthetics is not about what is good, but about what is beautiful. In 1750 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the word "Ästhetik" for the science which examines those things that belong to the sphere of sensible objects (Baumgarten 1750). Baumgarten emphasized that beauty manifests itself only within the confines of the sensible world and thereby distinguished itself from principles of both moral goodness and rightfulness.

While white "American cool" or that of the British gentleman might be most compatible with Aristotle's "virtue ethics," African American cool develops a supplementary dimension through the introduction of a subversive irony that is not only linked to the particular social constellation in which it is imbedded, but also dependent on aesthetics as an autonomous value that needs to be conceived of as a unit detached from ethical considerations. Often the aesthetic image of cool seems to matter even more than the moral content of the character.

When Dinerstein interprets the birth of cool as "a synthesis of West African aesthetic attitudes and Anglo-American ideas of self-mastery" (Dinerstein: 267), one needs to understand that, in philosophical terms, this implies the highly problematical unification of ethical and aesthetic components. African American cool attempts to involve the white cool character in playful, subversive aesthetic patterns and manages to integrate values like spontaneity, "being relaxed," and creativity into its overall ethical scheme of emotional control. In this sense, Kochman recognizes cool as a cultural category able to unite opposite values: "They see self-control as 'getting it together': harmonizing the internal and external forces" (Kochman 1981: 31). Finally, Pountain and Robins find that when black cool works towards ritualized expressions, the imperturbable state of cool, enhanced by aesthetic values like smooth, fluid, and easy motion, is tinged by a mysteriousness or even by "moral ambivalence" (Pountain & Robins 2000: 44). Only this can explain how this kind of coolness has managed to undermine white American cool which was, as everybody agrees, virtuous. It is clear that there is no place for this pattern in Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Though African American cool remains a matter of ethics to some extent, a considerable part of black cool appears as nothing other than an aesthetic self-expression relying on improvisation, vibrancy, aliveness, and constant surprise. "Blacks have lifelong experience engaging in cultural events in which their emotions have become aroused. This has developed in

them the freedom to abandon themselves to the force of their feelings without fear of being unable to control their impact," says Kochman (1981: 115). The purpose of this aesthetic project is to gain the pride, dignity and social recognition and this is not included in the program of virtue ethics. The confusion white people felt when confronted with black cool, has much to do with the moral ambivalence that contests the unanimous identification of cool with good. In 1921, Anne Shaw Faulkner explains in her article "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?" that "the effect of jazz on the normal brain produces an atrophied condition on the brain cells of conception" which leads to the inability to distinguish between good and evil. Jazz, Faulkner argues, is morally and physiologically detrimental.[1]

Values in Philosophy

It is necessary to introduce a theory of values that has developed a concept of value independently of ethical categorizations such as the good or virtue. This discipline is axiology. Let us first point out that, in principle, a value has no ethical connotation, that it is simply a matter of perception produced by subjects who are confronted with physical and mental elements that are not equal and to which they want to attribute a rank. The term "value" has been central to national economics and became a philosophical term—outside sparse discussions within virtue ethics—only of late.

Nietzsche prepared the groundwork for a non-ethical value theory by speaking of a devaluation (Umwertung) of all values that he designed as a critique of a Christian system of moral values (Nietzsche 1966), thinking that post-Kantian philosophy—though it was believed to be critical of its own history—had joined a new conformism and new forms of submission. Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science* that even moral values, though they are part of our moral experience and indispensable to our best moral explanations, should be attuned to our particular (aesthetic) sensibilities.

The only philosophy that has attempted to design an autonomous theory of values is axiology, which is primarily concerned with classifying what things are good and how good they are. Axiology has existed since the second half of the nineteenth century and has mainly been developed by Franz Brentano (1838-1917), Alexius von Meinong (1853-1920), Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), and Max Scheler (1874-1928). Austrian philosophy of values, developed around Brentano and Meinong, is closely related to empiricism and the philosophy of economics. Max Scheler's phenomenological Wertphilosophie (value philosophy) puts forward values as objective, reasonable, and permanent qualities able to oppose Kantian ethics of duty. In 1915, Scheler published a work on "material value ethics" (Der Formal-

ismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik) in which he develops a hierarchy of values.

The German philosopher Hermann Lotze, following the Neo-Kantian tendency of interpreting philosophy as a science of values (later emphasized by Heinrich Rickert in his Unmittelbarkeit und Sinndeutung [1939]), introduced cultural values "as a substitute for the supernatural" and human values as "the spark of the human spirit illuminating the dark, materialistic world of the physicist, engineer and economist" (Andrew 1995: 6). Lotze's regard for spiritual values—an inheritance from the idealistic movement—and his view of science as a discipline determined to pulverize everything that is beautiful and good, led him to an empirical reconstruction of spiritual values.

American Theory of Values: Perry and Locke

Lotze has had considerable influence on William James and American pragmatism (see Kraushaar 1938, 1940). Later, a student of James, Ralph Barton Perry, cultivated an outspoken interest in the philosophy of Lotze, Münsterberg, Meinong, Rickert, and Windelband. In his seven-hundred-page General Theory of Value, Perry regrets that values have been dealt with in a dispersed fashion shifting back and forth between ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of religion and theory of knowledge. First, he wants to establish a theory of values as a recognized and unified branch of philosophy (Perry 1926: 4). Second, he declares that morality is only one special division of the field of value theory (6). Perry, who was the leader of the New Realism movement, spoke out for a multiplicity of values and a theory able to consider several standards of values—the same object may possess positive value in one sense and negative value in another (10). Necessarily, Perry's reflections lead to a disqualification of the term "the good" because realistically we should only speak of negative and positive cases and never of "evil" and "good." The detachment of value theory from ethics becomes clearest here.

In 1917 (the year of Brentano's death), the African American philosopher Alain Leroy Locke submitted a doctoral thesis at Harvard University on the problem of classification in the theory of values, which, though apparently unconnected to the work of Scheler, applies hierachizations of values very similar to Scheler's. Locke's thesis supervisor was Perry. Locke, who had been a graduate student in Berlin between 1910 and 1911, seems to cover in his thesis all of Perry's interests and discusses the classification of types of values with the help of contemporary (mainly German) theories of

psychology (Münsterberg), aesthetics (V. Ehrenfels), and economics, especially delving into Rickert's article "Lebenswerte und Kulturwerte" (1911).

In an article that appeared almost twenty years later—and which remains one of the few pieces in which the author would deal with formally philosophical questions—Locke refers once again to "Brentano, the father of modern value-theory." Like Perry who had been working on the same project more than a decade earlier, Locke evokes possibilities of a philosophical pluralism of values. According to Locke, American philosophy—pragmatism in particular—had transposed absolutes "from the realm of Being to the realm of practice" (J. Washington 1986: 149) resulting in an "almost universal fundamentalism of values in action" (Locke 1983: 22). Some have seen Locke's swiping critique of any commitment to absolutes as a "libertarian defense of ethnocentric particularity" (Harris 1998: 241). However, examples show that Locke had in mind something more sophisticated.

First, Locke critiques both rationalist and empiricist worldviews because the world order they assume is not objective and independent of human consciousness but, according to Mark Helbling on Locke, "available to discovery, understanding or imitation" (Helbling 1979: 291). A typical example is behaviorism, which avoids all general normative input and ends up as either individualistic-anarchic or bloodlessly scientific. This is the reason why Locke refuses to see values as simple moral categories or codes of conduct, but insists on their rootedness in existential situations. Only this rootedness provides meaningful experiences independently of moral categories. Locke states that "we must realize that not in every instance is this normative control effected indirectly through judgmental or evaluational processes, but often through primary mechanisms of feeling modes and dispositional attitudes" (Locke 1983: 22).

Locke does not present an alternative theory of values but insists that value-modes are not dependent on thought-action alone, but also on "attitudes" which he defines as emotional aspects of human behavior. Values induce "the moral attitude toward the situation irrespective of context" (24). "Arbitrary objectivism" on the other hand, construes rational absolutes in terms of normative and categorical elements. In reality, however

> value-genre often evades its definition and breaks through its logical barriers to include content not usually associated with it. The awe-inspiring scene becomes "holy," the logical proof, "beautiful," creative expression a "duty," and in every case the appropriate new predicate follows the attitude and the attitude cancels out the traditionally appropriate predicates. (26)

Values are not merely "rationalized and mediated by processes of evaluation and formal value judgments" (23) but they change with a change of

feeling-attitude. In other words, values cannot be reduced to the colorless order of a factual reality submitted to logical definition, but they "are rooted in attitudes, not in reality, and pertain to ourselves, not to the world" (31). In the end, within his "balanced analysis of values," Locke intends to shift moral behavior from ethics to aesthetics when writing:

> In fact, moral behavior, when it becomes dispositional, with the smooth feeling-curve of habit and inner equilibrium, normally takes on a quasi-aesthetic quality, as reflected in the criterion of taste and noblesse oblige rather than the sterner criterion of "must" and of "duty." (29)

Certainly, Locke's statement reads very much like a repudiation of Kantian ethics of duty, similar to a critique that many virtue ethicists could deliver (though neither he nor Perry mentions virtue ethics in the above works). However, Locke's philosophy does more than disqualify ethics of duty and more than establishing a relativism of feeling and attitudes in ethics. His project is more radical. The smooth feeling-curve of habit and inner equilibrium that normally takes on a quasi-aesthetic quality is reminiscent of cool ritualized expressions able to generate "moral ambivalence" or, in Locke's expression, a pluralism of values. The reason is that these values are not meant to be "good" or "bad." They are instead categorized as merely positive or negative. Virtue ethics refuses to speak of values as absolutes, but still it continues using "good" and "bad" as categories.

Horace Kallen has found that Locke's relativistic attitude leads him to "give up the idea of equality as identification, as sameness with whites, and to urge equality as parity in and of his difference from the whites" (Kallen 1957: 121). In matters of race, there are no absolute standards and it becomes possible "to see the human enterprise as free, friendly, creative inter-communication between differents and their reciprocal enrichment" (ibid.). This means that Locke sees black and white as value categories without entering a good-evil scheme necessarily leading to racism; but he will not insist on equality either because this would reduce value differences to nothing and make axiology impossible.

It becomes clear that cool as an aesthetic value can be more properly grasped by Locke's value-attitude analysis than by virtue ethics. Once coolness is freed from an ethical scheme it can develop a sort of dynamism that is only thinkable in aesthetics. Locke believed that the correct definition of a value is nothing other than that of being a relation between an object and an appreciating subject. A purely value-based perspective grants more insights into the mechanisms of cool as a unique African American social phenomenon that works with a variety of possibilities which are not necessarily ethically predetermined (through asceticism, Victorian morals, etc.). Let us look,

for example, at Norman Mailer's 1957 definition of the black culture of hip delivered in his seminal article "The White Negro" where he writes: "Therefore, men are not seen as good or bad (that they are good-and-bad is taken for granted) but rather each man is glimpsed as a collection of possibilities (. . .) and this is the dynamic, provided the particular character can swing at the right time" (Mailer 1970: 14). This clearly crystallized a shift of cool from virtue to an axiologically defined value.

What mattered for the black person was to be visible as a human being in front of white people. At that moment the black subject did not care about what was good or bad but rather about what made him aesthetically valuable at the moment. Cool as a value might still concern the person's character but, the way it appears, it requires to be judged in the first place as a person's aesthetic performance. Moral ambivalence becomes possible only within such a constellation of elements. The notion of black cool is not that of a symbolizing function of "real" virtuous behavior or character that everybody should strive for, but rather an aesthetic attitude desirous to obtain social recognition within a hostile world.

Cool beyond Ethics

Why was subversion so important? Here it becomes necessary to have a further look at white cool with which black cool was confronted. "White cool" thrived together with republican and puritan "virtues" such as rational thinking and self-control that could be crystallized in Protestant work ethic. Its natural proximity with deontological ethics has already been referred to above. In the worst case, the relativism intrinsic to virtue ethics would be exploited in order to advertise arbitrary values as objective rules of what is right. Also, many "virtues" might have only been promoted as such by white people as a part of an anti-black policy. One would decide to present arbitrary values as virtues and subsequently argue that blacks are unable to obtain them. As a matter of fact, it would frequently be pointed out that most values could only be obtained by sticking to the virtuous rules of emotional control, a condition which made them presumably inaccessible for black people.

Such a restrictive pattern might be present even already in Aristotle's virtue ethics because Aristotle addresses an audience who is already courageous, tempered, etc., and in order to be virtuous, one must have been brought up in good habits (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b4-6). In the present context, Aristotle would clearly be on the side of white Americans as Southgate points out when saying that "the society Aristotle lived in . . . was the most wealthy and powerful at that time" which is "the position post-war America has enjoyed" (2003b: 458). Aristotle worked with the powerful

people (he was a tutor to Alexander the Great) and therefore does not have much in common with African Americans.

In a word, due to a particular mechanism intrinsic to a distorted virtue ethics made up by white people, blacks were excluded from white cool. This is the reason why black people had to create their own cool that had to use subversion in order to establish blacks as equal and able to function according to "normal" standards. Interestingly, black cool applies a similar double bind saying that "only cool people can understand what is cool" (Southgate 2003b: 454).

Humanity as a Value

It is obvious that for the black American, being cool has not simply been a matter of behaving in a virtuous way or of adopting a good character but in the first place it was a means of being recognized as a human being. This provides a supplementary argument that helps to emphasize the distance between black cool and virtue ethics. This time black cool moves, paradoxically, in the direction of Kant's philosophy. This is surprising because Kant's ethics of duty should have nothing to do with the aesthetics of cool. However, in Kant's fundamental principle of morality, in the Categorical Imperative, there is a "humanity formulation" that is definitely attributable to black cool. This moral principle demands that every person must "act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (2002: 429). The imperative which suggests that all persons deserve at least some basic moral consideration is what black people wanted to obtain through cool behavior. Cool made them valuable as human beings (though not necessarily good). For W. E. B. Du Bois, the most important "Negro mission" was to utter "a call for Negroes not to be exterminated" (Gordon 2000: 18) and Cornel West sees as the modern diasporic black's main problem that of "namelessness" even today (West 1993: 16). Frantz Fanon was disturbed by the fact that he had to feel like "an object in the midst of objects" (Fanon 1967: 109) and Césaire Aimé found that black people were "denied even the notion of humanity" (Aimé 1972: 78).

For the longest time of his residence in America the black man had neither name nor value; cool behavior could equip him with the value he needed up to the point that sometimes cool was "the only source of pride, dignity, and worth in the absence of the outward status symbols of materialism and title that mark the success in American culture" (Majors & Billson 1992: 30). African Americans did not feel the need to evolve from a "bad" to a

virtuous moral state but rather from nobody to somebody. Du Bois was convinced that "all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness" (Du Bois 1993: 43) and James Baldwin thought that most black people believed "that if one had had the white man's advantages, one would never have become as bewildered and as joyless and as thoughtlessly cruel as he" (Baldwin 1972: 137). That black people have virtue or a good character was simply taken for granted as shows this typical passage from Amiri Baraka: "In this tiny America where the most delirious happiness can only be caused by the dollar, a man continues to make daring references to some other kind of thought" (Baraka 1967: 64). Du Bois, "filled with idiosyncratic rhapsodies on the faith and virtue" (Moses 2004: 223) as he was, believed in the virtuous qualities of an African American Volksgeist. He did not need virtue ethics in order to establish the goodness of the black race.

However, no matter what they thought of themselves, black people continued to be treated as "the mules of the world," were denied "full humanity, intelligence, and equality" (Phelps 2007: 63) until "servanthood became . . . a station of life which was not deserving of the privilege of basic human rights and dignity" (Grant 2007: 134). Malcolm X reported that he had "never met white people yet . . . who won't refer to you as a boy or a gal, no matter how old you are or what school you came out of" (X 1995: 277). For Malcolm X it was clear that "black people will never value themselves as long as they subscribe to a standard of valuation that devalues them" (West 2001: 137). Things do not seem to have changed completely. In the conversations that George Yancy had with seventeen African American philosophers (Yancy 1998) the theme of value appears over again. Adrian Piper points out that "the primary problem is that everybody assumes that Black women are basically maids or prostitutes" (Piper 1998: 59) and Lewis Gordon reports that he asks "every day not only "Who am I?" but "What am I?" (Gordon 1998: 105) and that "when all is said and done the question is: what are we worth?" For Gordon, anti-black racism "raises the question: Do black people deserve to exist?" (ibid.) and Anita Allen addresses a similar problem by claiming that "we should be tired of always having to explain how and that we are good enough for the discipline" (Allen 1998: 172). Leonard Harris sees as the basic problem of racism "that it doesn't allow for people to be honored" (Harris 1998: 220).

Also the "Americanness" of blacks can be an issue. Chester Fontenot describes the characteristic experience of how he went in the late 1980s together with black and white American colleagues to a conference in Germany and how the fact to be addressed by the Germans as "Americans" created a kind of surrealist experience in the group because white and black colleagues would perceive this identification in different terms: "The African

Americans agreed in unison that being called an American had shaken our consciousness because, in America, we are almost never identified in language that suggests that we are significant citizens" (Fontenot 2001: 2).

The "nothingness of a nigger" (Korang 2001: 168), that is, the fact of being "homogenized as the black other" made blacks invisible for centuries and let them doubt about their sheer existence. The aesthetics of cool was one means of "defense against sub-human categorization" (Holt 1972: 153) which means that any ethics of black cool must be defined as a survival ethics trying to appropriate certain values by presenting black people as valuable subjects.

This concept of cool can very well be grasped with the help of value theory because cool as a humanity principle is simply a positive value, but not necessarily good. Kant's idea did not to say that only those people who are good should never be treated as a means. Again, seen through this perspective, cool as a humanity principle cannot be inserted into the agenda of virtue ethics.

Conclusion

Virtue ethics expresses what is good. It might be relativistic to some extent when considering values within certain social contexts, but it still claims to refer to the good in the most general sense. Black cool cannot be fully integrated into virtue ethics for two reasons: first, as an aesthetic manifestation, it transgresses the grid of good and bad, that is, it transgresses even the more relativistic grid of virtue ethics. Second, being determined by the ambition to compel recognition in the face of white supremacist dehumanization, black cool strives for the absolute value of humanity and this, again, cannot be handled by virtue ethics—this time because virtue ethics is too relativistic. Black cool simultaneously uses the aesthetic-relativistic and the absolute-humanist agenda and derives its force from this paradox. The absolute, ethical humanity value is attained through a relativistic play with aesthetic values that do not necessarily serve an ethical end. This is why black cool is mysterious: its approach is contradictory and based on a paradox.

White American "virtue ethics" on the other hand, led every man to concentrate "attention upon himself" promoting, as found Tocqueville, "an inordinate love of material gratification" that made them overly serious as well as "cold and calculating" (Tocqueville 1983: I, 140-41). Sooner or later, Tocqueville said, this "virtuous materialism" would enervate the soul. Tocqueville might have been right. A hundred years later William Faulkner would write not about American men but even about the American woman

that she is "cold and undersexed; she has projected her libido onto the automobile . . . because it will not maul and tussle her" (Faulkner 1945: 239). Coolness has here turned into coldness. Interestingly, also in this case virtue has recuperated aesthetic values but these values are now inscribed in a static grid of a consumer ethics that no longer depends on moral goods (such as justice, faith, etc.) but merely on the value of material objects. It overlaps with what Baudrillard, still half a century later, would write about American civilization: that capitalist culture has become an "autistic performance, a pure and empty form . . . which has replaced the Promethean ecstasy of competition" (Baudrillard 1986: 25) and in which "fascination has replaced seduction" (119). Values have here become frozen and coolness has become dogmatic, undergoing approximately the same process that art undergoes when it is transformed into propaganda art, or eroticism when it is transformed into pornography.

"Cool as a virtue" has led to alienated results that "cool as a value," with its more authentic connotations could more successfully avoid. Of course, the success is only partial. Gladwell shows how the "cool today, mass tomorrow" scheme of capitalist society deprives cool values more and more of the very authenticity they depend on and turns them into consumer goods. To some extent white cool and black cool meet within the realm of capitalist consumer ethics that renders both indistinguishable. Still, cool as a value seems to manage much better to organize an escape; black cool needs to be "hunted" as show Southgate's and Gladwell's articles on "coolhunting" which has become a major activity of marketing specialists.

Notes

1. In *Ladies' Home Journal* 38, August 1921, p. 16, quoted from Lemke 1998: 63.
1. See also Garcia's (1992) discussion of Locke's essay.
1. Zora Neale Hurston 1978 quoted from Grant, 131.
1. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* quoted from Fontenot, 3.
1. Quoted from Takaki, 72-73.

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