

“THE USE AND ABUSE OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY: JAMES
WARLEY MILES AND THE DANGERS OF RACIST
DEHISTORICIZATION



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Over the course of his life, the prominent South Carolina philosopher James Warley Miles addressed students at the College of Charleston at least three times: general commencements in 1851 and 1863, and a Chrestomathic Society commencement in 1874, one year before Miles' death. Reflective of the intellectual culture of the mid to late 19th century, each of these addresses, and Miles' public philosophy more generally, is hyper-fixated on the roles of history, sociopolitical institutions, and a foundational undercurrent of race to both. As a thinker, Miles' work is derivative and over-encumbered with an antiquated style, even for the period. Examining some of the methodological issues in the history of 19th century philosophy and philosophical critiques of his influences, we will see that Miles is morally condemnable as a fierce defender of slavery and racial domination, and that his work illustrates the often complex entanglement between doing philosophy and doing history.

The most accessible point of entry into this discussion is to first look at what has been written about Miles previously and fill in any gaps with Miles' own arguments. The secondary literature is sparse, and appropriately so, with the germinal works being historian Ralph Luker's article "God, Man, and the World of James Warley Miles, Charleston's Transcendentalist," and later sections of his book *A Southern Tradition in Theology and Social Criticism, 1830-1930: The Religious Liberalism and Social Conservatism of James Warley Miles, William Porcher DuBose, and Edgar Gardner Murphy*. Luker presents a detailed account of Miles' life in each text, from childhood

to his preaching positions and tenures at the College of Charleston as Chair of the History of Intellectual Philosophy and Greek Literature from 1850-1854 and 1865-1871, as well as Librarian for several years in between.¹ Miles is generally portrayed as a key but often ostracized member of the Charleston literati, a philosophical outcast who preferred the company of only a few other intellectuals with similar interests in German philosophy and literature.² Interestingly, the focus is often put on Miles' depression and restlessness, the reason for his inability to commit to any post, religious or professorial, for a great amount of time. According to Luker, we are to believe Miles is a figure predominantly defined by misunderstanding, both in his own day and by contemporary scholars.

This portrayal is flawed. The biographical sections in the article and book are overly sympathetic, considering that the subject was in reality an influential member of the Southern intellectual and religious elite, even if less so than other more well-known figures in U.S. history. Descriptions of Miles' frequent socializing in the back of Russell's Bookshop overwhelm the reader with a list of famous names, from the writers William Gilmore Simms, William J. Grayson—who coined the term “master race”—and Paul Hamilton Hayne to the young classicist Basil Gildersleeve.³ It is clear that Miles' style of life was completely different from that of the majority of white Southerners at the time, and worlds away from the experiences of enslaved peoples

¹ Luker, “God, Man, and The World of James Warley Miles, Charleston's Transcendentalist,” 115-16, 119.

² Luker “God, Man,” 111.

³ Luker, “God, Man,” 110.

under the system which Miles so ardently defended. This pattern of understatement and over-explanation is characteristic of Luker's work, as the thorough examination of interpersonal details leaves little room for the sociopolitical and cultural factors that afforded Miles the opportunity to lead churches, travel internationally, eulogize John C. Calhoun, and hold (or turn down) teaching positions at well-regarded universities. A sympathetic historiography of Miles does not in itself raise serious questions for this project, but does segue into a related methodological problem in Luker's analysis of Miles' philosophy. As we will see, by mischaracterizing Miles' philosophy as a Southern form of transcendentalism simply because of shared influences, Luker dehistoricizes and depoliticizes Miles, which allows him to avoid genuinely recognizing racial attitudes as foundational to Miles' philosophy.

Abstraction from history, primarily of racist historical ideas, and subsequent misreading of the philosophical content is not limited to Miles and his commentators. Work on G.W.F. Hegel, Miles' greatest philosophical influence, and the transcendentalists with whom Luker attempts to link Miles illustrate the same problem, in which the avoidance of morally condemnable attitudes of race are ignored or made so abstract that the content itself becomes misunderstood. In the following sections, this project aims at something of a rehistoricization, in which Miles and his philosophical influences can be examined as a reflection of a larger trend in the historiography of the 19th century, and ultimately urges a recentering of race as truly foundational to its intellectual climate and philosophy.

Luker's philosophical analysis of Miles in the early article and later book chapter relies heavily on the categorization of Miles as a "transcendentalist." "Transcendentalist" in this case, though, is not at all its common usage, that is, the loosely connected literary and philosophical tradition of early/mid-19th century New England exemplified by figures who loom large in the American imagination: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and later Walt Whitman. Luker defines his transcendentalism specifically to fit Miles' philosophy, as "one who shared a particular pattern of religious liberalism, [and] a peculiar philosophical and theological perspective."⁴ The evidence for this abstract connection for Luker is a "guilt by association of ideas," or shared list of influences. Luker argues that Miles' reading list, like the Transcendentalists', similarly included, with the exception of utopian socialism, "the pre-Socratics, Plato, Neo-Platonism and its seventeenth century revival at Cambridge, the mysticism of Böhme and Swedenborg, Calvinism, Unitarianism, British moral philosophy, the English romantics, the French eclectics ... and oriental philosophy, as well as German idealist philosophy and literature," but with the most obvious shared lineages still ending up being the ideas of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Schleiermacher.⁵ While this may be true, and can be easily evidenced by looking through Miles' personal library catalogue, which does contain

⁴ Luker, "God, Man," 121.

⁵ Luker, "God, Man," 122.

many of the aforementioned sources, there are still several problems with Luker's transcendentalist claims.

First, it could be argued that a reading list of philosophy and theology from some of the most essential to relatively obscure traditions is not at all enough to connect two figures to an intellectual movement, especially one as eclectic as transcendentalism. Luker himself seems somewhat uncertain about the label in his book chapter, writing the following on Miles' philosophy in relation to his geographical location:

“Something far richer and more diverse was at work in the mind of Warley Miles. Had he lived in Hartford, he would have enjoyed the company of Horace Bushnell. Had he taught with John W. Neven and Philip Schaff at the little German Reformed Seminary in Pennsylvania, he might have been known as an advocate of the Mercerburg theology. Had he moved west to St. Louis, he would have found kindred spirits in its small community of Hegelians. Had he grown up near Boston, he might have been called a Transcendentalist. But James Warley Miles was a Southerner, and that would shape his use of the language he shared with these American idealists in ways they would have found repugnant.”⁶

⁶ Luker, *A Southern Tradition in Theology and Social Criticism, 1830-1930: The Religious Liberalism and Social Conservatism of James Warley Miles, William Porcher DuBose, and Edgar Gardner Murphy*, 55-56

Here, Luker somewhat gives the game away, revising his own earlier categorization. Rather than transcendentalists, Miles is even more broadly associated with disparate groups of “American idealists,” where regional identity seems to play a greater part in one's philosophy than the ideas themselves. Though this does raise several interesting questions about the role of geography in the formation of philosophical movements, Luker's explanation of Miles' philosophy is much more intentional. In relying on Southern identity and the traditional political and ethical views associated with the 19th century American South, Luker severs Miles' actual stated philosophical arguments from his “philosophy” in a more general sense, chalking up any repugnant political views to mere differences in belief. So, in the case of J.W. Miles, if racial attitudes are abstracted out of the philosophical content as Luker attempts, it becomes impossible to see that Miles' racial views are not just central to his explicit texts on race, but also necessary to explain his philosophy of history and misuse of Hegel. Similarly, this particular move of Luker's allows him to associate Miles with philosophers who are much more engaging, but as we will see, can also easily trigger the issue of dehistoricization in regard to race.

As to Miles' actual philosophical beliefs, Luker's admission that to Miles' list of influences “one would want to add the names of Aristotle, Richard Hooker, [and] Edmund Burke” is much more telling.⁷ In “The Relation Between the Races at the South,” his primary treatise on race, Miles lays out an argument for slavery that he

⁷ Luker, *A Southern Tradition in Theology and Social Criticism, 1830-1930*, 57.

believes will shift the conversation away from weak and easily objectionable talking points and toward supposedly indisputable claims of slavery that utilize the Aristotelian language of natural law. In abhorrently casual terms, Miles writes in a footnote before his main argument that the discussion of slavery he is about to enter into is framed incorrectly due to the language of “slavery” itself. Referring to it as “so called slavery,” he explains that because he defines slavery as “forcible subjection of a race equally endowed with the subjecting race,” and because black people are, according to Miles, so obviously inferior to whites by their nature, the master/slave relationship between the races in the South can obviously not be called slavery, as “the negro in the South is not properly a slave [and] is really in his highest and most favorable position as a human creature.”⁸ Besides its moral reprehensibility, this line of thinking presupposes the rest of Miles’ argument that “the relations of the white and black races result from a natural Law, just as much as do the effects of the Law of gravitation,” and that to justify such a claim is as unnecessary as trying to justify the existence of the Moon orbiting Earth.⁹ With these normative claims, but without normative justification, Miles argues that any objections can be circumvented by the establishment of slavery as a natural law. To question a natural law would not only be unreasonable, but essentially futile, thus turning his original normative claims about slavery into merely descriptive ones that serve specific political ends.

⁸ Miles, “The Relation Between the Races At the South,” 4.

⁹ Miles, “The Relation Between the Races At the South,” 6

Even with such a position, Miles does think it necessary to offer a historical perspective and justification for the blanket claim that Africans are naturally inferior, as opposed to other people groups who have been enslaved like the Hungarians. The historiography that Miles offers is taken directly from Miles' philosophy of history, which in turn shares many of its ideas with G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy of history and writings on Africa.¹⁰ For Miles, Africans are distinguished from the Hungarian, Greek, Roman, and Far Eastern slaves by their inability to develop a society and culture equal to that of their masters, or in other words, gain an equal footing in order to free themselves from slavery.

In this view, Africa is a land outside the purview of history itself, "a vast continent enriched with every various bounty of nature, with the attrition of diverse and even more highly developed tribes," but populated by a people who have created no civilization "above the gross savagism which he seems to have exhibited centuries ago."¹¹ This false history echoes Hegel's own thoughts and conspicuous silences on Africa in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Hegel calls Africa "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night," excluded from the progress of the World Spirit due to the Africans' supposed lack of any developed socio-political culture or higher concepts that

¹⁰ Here it should be noted that in the catalogue of Miles' library, there are no texts by G.W.F. Hegel. However, as Luker himself puts it, "the absence of Hegel remains an anomaly," and even though Miles is likely to have read Hegel in the original German, the other German theologians who greatly influenced him were themselves greatly influenced by and wrote on Hegel.

¹¹ Miles, "The Relation Between the Races," 9-10.

demonstrate universality.¹² In this faux-historical narrative, Hegel relied on widely published travel narratives of Africa, but consistently embellished details of African, particularly Ashanti, society in order to paint a vivid picture of Africans as cannibalistic, primitive, and violent.¹³

Engaging in historical erasure and caricatures of an entire continent, both Miles and Hegel tell us plainly enough that if history is the unfolding of a rational (and for Miles, providential) plan that fully realizes the character and destiny of human beings, then Africa has no place in it but to be carved up, violated, and enslaved. The only way to raise up the African people, then, would be to forcibly take them out of Africa and place them under the control of a white master, who would elevate their very nature through protection and servitude. Similarly, for Miles, as with Hegel, the Spirit of History moves westward, beginning with the ancient eastern civilizations, to the classical age of Greece and Rome, and once more to Christian Europe. As Hegel puts it, “world history goes from East to West: as Asia is the beginning of world history, so Europe is simply its end.”¹⁴ Methodologically, Hegel and Miles’ account of history itself might be seen as a racial dehistoricization or abstraction, as the removal of Africa and its innumerable contributions to world history at that point served to promote simple racial attitudes common among elite European and American intellectuals of the 19th century. Similarly, it allowed them to avoid confronting the idea that if Africa is part

¹² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 109-111.

¹³ Bernasconi, “Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti”

¹⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 92.

of the development of World History, then the enslavement of its population would be much more easily condemned.

It is not a great leap to see how Hegel's philosophy of history and its exclusion of Africa would have easily appealed to James Warley Miles, a staunch supporter of the Confederacy, an institution he believed could carry on the unfolding of human progress through universal history. In an American century of civil unrest leading to war, growing industrialization and global power, and debates over westward expansion and manifest destiny, a figure like James Warley Miles could take Hegel's history, infuse it with American sentiments and prejudices, and easily ask the question of continuing universal history, what is west of Europe if not the United States?

There is, however, a key piece in Miles' philosophy that allows us to see the misuse of Hegel's philosophy in defense of slavery. This piece relates to Miles' and Hegel's opinions on the Haitian Revolution, Hegel's master/slave dialectic and echoes of that dialectic in Miles' view of slavery, and finally, Susan Buck-Morss' masterful work on some of these connections, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History. In making these philosophical and historical comparisons, I take seriously Buck-Morss' idea of thinking of facts "not as data with fixed meanings, but as connective pathways that can continue to surprise us," and that traveling these pathways is a valuable act in itself.¹⁵ As I have mentioned before, Miles' philosophy is quite derivative of his philosophical and

¹⁵ Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History, 13.

religious influences, and his life full of the production and promulgation of morally heinous ideas of the Southern ruling class. But these facts seen as connective pathways lead us to more engaging and complex philosophers like Hegel, and in the process allow us to observe methodological problems of racist dehistoricization that we may have not noticed before.

In Hegel, *Haiti, and Universal History*, Buck-Morss makes the claim that, although downplayed, ignored, or erased in the secondary scholarship, Hegel's knowledge of the Haitian Revolution served as a direct inspiration for the master/slave dialectic. In the section *Self-Consciousness in the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel creates a narrative depicting a key process in the journey of the individual spirit toward recognition of its own self-consciousness. In order for this self-recognition to be realized, the individual consciousness must come up against the will of another rational consciousness who also has the power of recognition. This conflict is a violent and dramatic one, and "the relation of both self-consciousnesses is thus determined in such a way that it is through a life and death struggle that each proves its worth to itself, and that both prove their worth to each other."¹⁶ There are only two outcomes of such a conflict for Hegel, that of death or the subjugation and bondage of one party by the other, thus the establishment of the master/slave, or lord/bondsman roles. But in that process of subjugation, the master's self-consciousness has become necessarily tied to the slave's recognition and can no longer be called a self-consciousness by and for-

¹⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.

itself. The slave, on the other hand, through the master's dependence on their labor and the realization that their own agency is being expressed through the products of that labor, becomes conscious of their own freedom, or "the true nature of rational agency" and the value of free will itself.¹⁷ By this process of sublation (a simultaneous negation and affirmation), the slave becomes free and the master is now dependent on the products of the slave's labor.

For Buck-Morss, this narrative, with its language of revolutionary struggle and slavery, has obvious real-life historical inspiration. Just three years before the publication of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the French were finally expelled from then-Saint-Domingue by formerly enslaved peoples, and the Republic of Haiti established. This defining moment in Transatlantic history, the only successful slave revolt leading to the establishment of a state free from slavery, was widely reported on in Europe and the United States, including publications that Hegel, and later in the century J.W. Miles, would have read. This struggle, a long-fought sublating process of dependence, recognition and the gaining of true freedom by the formerly enslaved, and which Hegel certainly knew of, was not just a realization of Enlightenment ideals by those who were explicitly denied them, but a concrete example of Hegel's phenomenology and world history. As Buck-Morss says, "the actual and successful revolution of Caribbean slaves against their masters is the moment when the dialectical logic of recognition becomes visible as the thematics of world history, the story of the

¹⁷ Krasnoff, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: An Introduction, 101.

universal realization of freedom,” and as a newly rediscovered moment in the historiography of Hegel, was the method “by which philosophy burst out of the confines of academic theory and became a commentary on the history of the world.”¹⁸

Returning to the philosophy of J.W. Miles, we can see the ways in which the master/slave dialectic was torn apart, with some ideas discarded and others repurposed with racist ulterior motives. While the masters may be dependent on the labor of their slaves, by denying Africans the very ability to have or create a culture, society, and even individual rationality “equal” to that of the whites, there would be no way for the enslaved to see the expression of their free will, and thus become conscious of their freedom. But more importantly, with this misuse of the master/slave dialectic in a faux-historical context, there would be no way for the enslaved to utilize the consciousness of their own freedom to gain practical freedom from bondage. In this manner, Miles divides the very concept of Hegelian sublation, allowing for only negation without affirmation.

Besides the undertones of Hegel in his writings, we can look to Miles’ explicit thoughts on the Haitian Revolution to further examine the misuse of Hegelianism. In *The Relation Between the Races at the South*, Miles anticipates the example of Haiti as an objection to his argument, touting a group of enslaved people who were able to gain their freedom from the supposedly superior race. In response, Miles argues that

¹⁸ Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History, 59-60.

the Haitian Revolution as a revolutionary political project was not of the Haitians' own volition, nor was it a success. According to this line of reasoning, "the negroes in Hayti did not emancipate themselves, but, under the influence of ignorant, foreign fanatics, they murdered their protectors, and relapsed into barbarism." Accepting Buck-Morss' Hegel/Haiti connection, Miles' view of Haiti seems a repudiation of the master/slave dialectic, both in practice and in theory. Finally, it is generally thought that despite his views on Africa and the master/slave relationship, Hegel's views on slavery are more complicated than an endorsement of the practice or a hardcore abolitionist stance. In her article "Hegel, History, and Race," for instance, philosopher Rocío Zambrana distinguishes between Hegel's positions on African slavery, an arbitrary practice based on conquest and an "absolute injustice," or "outside of proper political relations," and Transatlantic slavery, a practice "Europeans had begun...by which Africans could become conscious of their own freedom," best eliminated gradually in an educational process.¹⁹ While this does position Europeans as necessary for the freedom of Africans whom they enslaved in the first place, a path for abolition is still left open. Similarly, in his introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Larry Krasnoff notes that the master/slave dialectic should not be read as an endorsement of slavery. While for Hegel violence and slavery are not in themselves rationally incoherent, problems arise in the public sphere when such practices are attempted to be justified.²⁰ With this in mind, the gulf

¹⁹ Zambrana, "Hegel, History, and Race," 254.

²⁰ Krasnoff, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: An Introduction*, 104.

between Miles' extreme pro-slavery philosophy and Hegelian thought seems to have widened even further, resulting in what looks to be an untenable position as a pro-slavery Hegelian, with the explanation being a misuse of Hegel on Miles' part.

While the previous sections' discussion of Miles' mis-Hegelianism and the connections between Haiti as a bridge between the two thinkers, and between theory and reality are crucial, Buck-Morss' methodological critique, in the end, turns out to be much more important to the practical aspect of this project. Buck-Morss uses Rousseau as an example of the historiographical paradigm based on disciplinary methods of "moral neutrality" that, "while based on a variety of philosophical premises, result in the same exclusions." In this way, "today's philosopher," who is trained to analyze theory totally abstracted from historical context, will attribute a universality to Rousseau's writings that transcends the author's own intent or personal limitations in order to avoid thereby the fallacy of reduction ad hominem. In both cases, the embarrassing facts are quietly allowed to disappear.²¹

Though this specific example refers to Rousseau, the critique still stands for Hegel in regard to the Haiti connection, and for Miles. This methodological critique is especially effective when applied to Ralph Luker's treatment of James Warley Miles. Suddenly, statements in Luker's work like "[Miles was] in thought and deed a cosmopolitan, who would attempt to articulate the world-view of Charleston's ruling

²¹ Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History, 34.

class in terms of the most advanced thought of the day” is not a harmless declaration of historical fact, but a failure to critically engage with Miles’ racial attitudes that form the basis of his social philosophy and philosophy of history.²² Hence, Luker’s analysis of Miles’ transcendentalism or idealism can also be re-evaluated by considering what ugly truths may have been shied away from through dehistoricization, or more specifically, focusing on Miles’ more abstract epistemology as evidence of his transcendentalism at the exclusion of political and social beliefs.

Even as Luker admits that Miles’ language in service of his separatist and pro-slavery politics would have repulsed other idealists, he—in a move of philosophical abstraction—does not consider that to be an American idealist may come with certain ideological commitments. The move is quite glaring in the case of the American Transcendentalists, who are strongly associated with abolitionism and other reform movements. Regardless of some of the Transcendentalists’ personal racial attitudes falling into a category of “romantic racialism,” abolitionism is almost always emphasized as necessary in understanding the Transcendentalists’ political and social philosophy, as well as their commitment to individualism.²³ The Transcendentalists’ convictions against slavery ran deep, with Theodore Parker even referencing the city of James Warley Miles, Charleston. Margaret Fuller’s “On The Narrative of Frederick Douglass,” Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lecture “The Fugitive Slave Law,” and Henry David

²² Luker, *A Southern Tradition in Theology and Social Criticism*, 57, 81.

²³ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, 100-102.

Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown" all express a commitment to abolitionism and the recognition of slavery as not only a national political ill, but a profoundly immoral practice.²⁴

Where does this leave J.W. Miles and Luker's abstracted categorization of his philosophy as "Charleston's transcendentalist," or a "Southern variant of the Romantic heresy"?²⁵ We have shown that a shared list of influences, or even certain shared metaphysical views, is not enough to group Miles with other more interesting philosophers like the Transcendentalists. This is not because a shared list of influences is not important. But in light of Buck-Morss' treatment of Hegel and Miles' own misuse of Hegelian thought, we can see Luker's argument for regional difference as a clear case of what Buck-Morss refers to as abstraction or relativization, and what I have before called "dehistoricization." By characterizing Miles' racism as a product of his environment, the philosophical language he used, and as if his racism was confined only to the texts explicitly dealing with race, Luker is able to treat Miles' racial views as peripheral to his philosophical project.

This critique asks us then to consider: what might a rehistoricization of J.W. Miles look like? We have already seen what a partial rehistoricization and recentering of race in Hegel's thought achieves, as Buck-Morss demonstrates throughout her book. With the Hegel/Haiti connection, we are able to see a wider picture of transnational

²⁴ Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, ix

²⁵ Luker, "God, Man," 102.

intellectual culture and gain an interesting perspective on the master-slave dialectic based on its historical inspirations. A similar perspective appears if we think of Miles' explicit racism and support of the Confederacy as a motivation for adopting a mis-Hegelian philosophy of history that excludes all black people and Africa itself from the providential unfolding of World History and allows the Confederacy to be the next great step in that progression. Similarly, if the natural law tradition is misused in a way that makes an entire race only capable of slavery and paternalized care by virtue of their racial inferiority, we can see Miles' philosophy is of practical import in arguing for slavery during a time just before its abolition, and in protecting the material interests and very lifestyle of Miles' Southern ruling class. Though Luker admits that this is what Miles' project is, he does not consider race to be central or necessary to understanding his philosophy.

More importantly, though, this rehistoricization of Miles urges us to consider the implications of the methodological problem of racist abstraction away from philosophical content. If this pervasive problem can be seen in historiography of Miles all the way to Hegel, one of the most influential philosophers of the 19th century, it stands to reason that other texts and figures can be reinterpreted or understood in more complete ways when racial attitudes are not pushed aside or abstracted away. Rather, they should be thought of as foundational to the philosophical content itself, and the ultimate goal to be the activity of recentering race or rehistoricizing should be thought of as reaching toward using facts as "connective pathways."

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