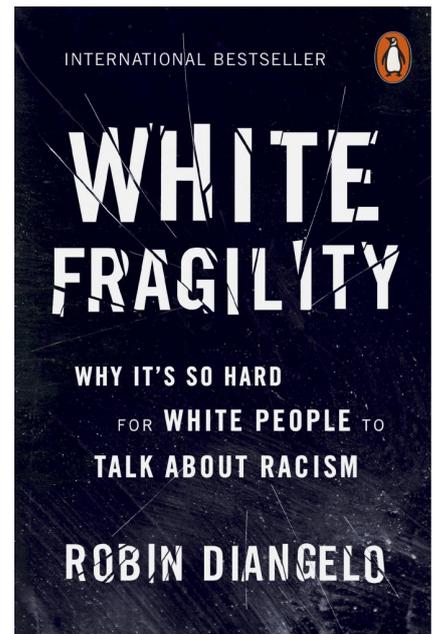


# Review: White Fragility – Part 3b: Pursuing a dynamic resolve – vocation and identity

This is the final part of my multi-part engagement with Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. My dialogue with the book commences in my first part ([link](#)); you may want to begin reading there. The book is about how white people, while participants and beneficiaries of systemic racism, are racially blind to themselves and complicit. So far I have engaged with DiAngelo's arguments through the lens of my own reflection, and in the previous post ([link](#)) I explored some biblical themes that support her view.

What she reveals about racism is well argued, but how do we move towards a dynamic of resolution? In this part my intent is to show how I find it more helpful to look beyond DiAngelo's ideology for that, and, in particular, I draw on a Christian understanding of vocation.



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## Part 3b – Vocation and identity.

There is much that resonates between DiAngelo and the Biblical voice. But there is also some discord. DiAngelo, is unashamedly, manifesting an *ideology*. “Ideologies are the frameworks through which we are taught to represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence” (page 21), she says, and I agree with that definition. In

fact, from a Christian point of view, a desire to shape our social existence by what Jesus “represents, interprets, understands, and makes sense of” is a decent description of what I would call “discipleship.”

Ideologically of course, DiAngelo is not neutral. I also don't think she, or anyone else, would describe her ideology as “Christian.” Some dialogue is needed at the point where the voices diverge, and that is my intent here. Unsurprisingly, I find the Biblical voice more compelling.

Consider what we raised previously about individual and collective identity. DiAngelo eschews individualism, and understandably so, because it underpins the white propensity to deflect: “I don't belong to a privileged class, I am just me!” If we are to move forward, we can't *ignore* individualism. Generalisation *reveals*, but *individuals* must act. This only happens when there is some sort of *alignment* between individual and collective identity, i.e. when a person has a sense of *ownership* about what is happening collectively.

DiAngelo has rightly revealed to white people our collective guilt. But how do we move forward with that? Collective guilt can only be dealt with *collectively*, because that is what is required for *systemic* change. It is manifest formally as enacted civil rights and forms of reparation and restitution, as well as organically through shifts in the dominant culture. No one person can achieve this, yet it doesn't just happen by itself, it requires individuals to act. And, as DiAngelo points out often, it's on white people to own their issues and do it, not people of colour to chase it.

To move forward we need an *alignment* of individuals and the collective. DiAngelo, in her anecdotes, often encounters a non-alignment. From one direction it looks like individualist defensiveness. From the other direction, an individual can be absorbed by the collective guilt. I've seen this as a form of

despair in people, an emotional overwhelming in which they are unhelpfully stuck in the shame of their privilege.

The biggest strength of *White Fragility* is that it elucidates well what is wrong and what is going on. Admission is a big part of the solution; but beyond that there is only a weak provision for the alignment we need.

It *can* be found, however, in the Biblical voice. Indeed, it's there in the person of Jesus. **What is the cross of Christ if it is not the perfect alignment of an individual carrying the load of collective guilt?** "He himself bore *our* sins" says Peter (1 Peter 2:24), along with a multitude of other New Testament witnesses. It is the very essence of atonement and it leads to redemption and reconciliation. The implications are also clear: Atonement neither excuses or permits ongoing complicity with evil and injustice. Rather, it compels that our bodies be used as "instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). Christian spirituality looks to a process of *sanctification* in which the individual matures in cooperation with the work of the Holy Spirit, into repentance, amendment of wrongdoing, and increasing Christlikeness. An aspect of that is understanding how we are called and led to interact within the collective of the church, humanity, and the wider world. Our word for this is *vocation*. It is *grounded* in forgiveness and freedom and is *towards* the righting of wrongs, and the renewal of the world.

**Vocation is individual-and-collective in character.** The individual Christian is caught up into a collective marked by the name of Jesus. We refer to the "body of Christ", one body united with many members or parts. As an individual-in-community, I am responsible for manifesting Christ's *character* to my brothers and sisters, and I am a "gift" as I *serve* in the particular way that I am enabled, impassioned, and inspired by God's Spirit and truth.

When it comes to responding to racial realities, true vocation

is a pathway forward. It is defined by Christ, and therefore counters self-absorption, deflection, and blindness to sin. It also incorporates a freedom from despair. It is active to pursue what is good and what is right; the individual finds their place to *move* the collective towards the justice desired. Today's vocational prophets speak truth, the pastors care and mend lives, the healers heal, the wisdom-bringers speak, and so on. DiAngelo speaks the truth about white people. Vocation values this truth, and is also grace-filled *towards* the pursuit of self-awareness, goodness, and justice.

In this regard, vocation interacts, helpfully, with privilege. It would take an entire essay to examine this properly, but we can take a quick look: In 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul explores the individual-in-collective image of the "body". In that exploration he recognises differences with regards to "honour." There is a close correlation, I believe, between that sense of societal honour and what we might call "privilege." Here's the point: Paul's reason for raising it is to turn it upside down. We should "treat with special honour" those who are otherwise "less honourable" (1 Corinthians 12:23). We privilege the underprivileged. We should favour those who have been unfavoured.

There's a corollary here that I believe DiAngelo, herself, recognises: privilege itself is not a sin. I didn't ask to be white and male. I didn't deliberately locate myself in a situation where I had access to good education. I have received the blessing of a healthy marriage and loving children; something that was neither owed to me or inevitable in life. The moral, and vocational question is not whether I am privileged or not, but what am I going to do with it. Again, the Biblical voice informs us. The character of vocation rests on Christ's character of *kenosis*, i.e. self-emptying. Christ didn't cling to his divine glory, but offered himself to the vulnerable, even laying down his life (Philippians 2:1-11). We are called to share this "mind of

Christ", and treat whatever we may have in the same way, i.e. self-sacrificially. If we have privilege, we don't cling to it. We certainly don't ignore it, or our complicity in whatever prevents others from attaining it. Rather we *spend it out* in the direction of goodness and justice. If I find myself with power, I don't hold it to myself, I use it to empower those who are disempowered. This means it's a self-effacing empowerment, even a handing-over-of-power empowerment.

In this way the **Biblical affirmation of vocation is not antagonistic to the values of *White Fragility*, but it is more useful.**

Before we conclude, however, I need to address one point of discord between the Biblical voice and DiAngelo's ideology. I'm hesitant to do this, as the value of *White Fragility* stands alone as a prophetic voice revealing white racism. Nor is DiAngelo setting out a fulsome treatise of her ideological foundations. Nevertheless, to the extent that I can discern her framework through which she can "represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence" I find myself looking for ground that is more solid, from which to heed the truth she speaks. The discord is around the dynamics of identity and intersectionality.

**Identity is a complex thing, and fundamental to our self-understanding.** If I can ask and answer "Who am I?" I'm expressing my *identity*. A significant component will be how I see myself as an *internal* self-reflection; DiAngelo recognises this, for instance, with respect to the complexity of a multiracial person (page xii). There is also a multiplicity of *external* characteristics by which I might self-identify and through which I might relate. "I am white, but I am also a cisgender woman, able-bodied, and middle-aged", she says (page xii). What is dominantly expressed as my identity will often be driven by social context. DiAngelo's whole project is to force those who do not see themselves racially to face that characteristic and its social context, and *incorporate* the

results into their perceived and articulated identity. This is the value of the book.

As the social characteristics of identity intertwine we end up with what has come to be known as “intersectionality.” We find *ourselves* at the intersection of social categorisations, a complexity of different identifying markers – race, gender, sexuality, class and so on. Intersectional analysis can be and often is beneficial. It is a means by which we might explore ourselves-in-context. Again, DiAngelo’s project is to confront white people with their disinclination to undertake that exploration.

However, **intersectionality is an intractable problem**. It has the same shape as DiAngelo’s book; it can *reveal* much, but, in and of itself, that revelation alone does not effect change well.

Intersectionality reveals the *complexity* of human existence; I am writing this in the aftermath of the assault and murder of Sarah Everard. I am hearing the pain of women. The male-female social identity is being tested and explored right now, and rightly so. I am also hearing the pain of people of colour, pointing out how many black women have been murdered and who haven’t received the same attention as this white woman. It’s pain upon pain, at an intersection of two categories of identity. We don’t wish to despise or diminish either of them.

The complexity, however, reveals the intractability. The social categories are not mere labels on dynamics which are otherwise the same shape; they rub up against each other in different ways. It can even lead to a form of unhelpful division. That’s not with regard to division *within* a social category; *White Fragility* has been a healthy exploration partly because it *refuses* to ignore the racial divide. What I mean is an eventual *competition* between categories; race vs. gender, gender vs. sexuality, religious identity vs. class and

so on.

**Here's the ideological collision:** It seems to me that DiAngelo's ideology attempts to look for the solution inside the intersectional black hole, as if it can be fathomed, and ordered, and solved. It can't be. We might be able to elucidate and bring justice to one social categorisation. But that intersects with another, and another, and sometimes they *are* at odds. We do what we can do make a judgement of rightness and wrongness within the finite categorisations that we can explore, but we *are* finite. There's a reason why we appeal to the infinite wisdom of the divine to bring about judgement and make things right! We can't do it. We certainly can't do it justly.

We all look into the intersectional blackhole. We all latch on to the identities that most adhere to our self-understanding. They are generally the ones that most correlate to our sense of pain and shame. We grasp hold of them, and we cry "What about me?!" So which of us has the right to rise above it all?

DiAngelo is unashamedly a believer in "identity politics": "All progress we have made in the real of civil rights has been accomplished through identity politics" (page x) and she lists everything from women's suffrage to same-sex marriage and even the recognition of the white working class in the 2016 presidential election. She is revealing her intersectional hierarchy. I am, at least to some extent, in agreement with it, as I hope I have demonstrated in this engagement with the book. But I am also very very wary of absolutising it. Civil rights are good, objectively so, and certainly within the social categories in which we dare to explore our complicity and fault. But civil rights action is *not* commensurate with bringing order to the intersectional chaos.

If intersectionality is a nexus of oppression, then it can only be ordered by those powerful enough to assert a hierarchy

of identity, by those with the dominance to set the meta-narrative in which the social identities exist. This *inevitably* is a new form of oppression; all it does is shift the injustice, and the intersectional twirl finds a different oppressive equilibrium. Paulo Freire warned of this years ago. In today's world, for instance, the "fight" between feminism and transgenderism is over the narrative that defines womanhood, and consequently, personhood. It is essentially a conflict about intersectional ordering. In my world, the phenomenon of "cancel culture" is invariably a diminution of the religious or spiritual identity. Ironically, and this is one of those intersectional complexities, in discounting spiritual and religious identity many purveyors of identity politics are complicit in racism. Generally speaking, white progressives value spiritual and religious identity less than people of colour do.

**An attempt to assert intersectional order is a form of domination.** The extent to which those who aspire to identity politics cannot see this, is the extent to which they, themselves, are blind to themselves; it is the extent to which they have arrogantly placed themselves above the fray, and consider their own hierarchy of identities as "normal" and others as deficient. They both ignore and perpetuate the injustices that eventuate and are thereby complicit in them. I wouldn't be the first to point out that many of them are white, and middle class, and are fragile in this exposure.

**Here is what I affirm:** If we reach into the intersectional quagmire, and examine the category of racial identity, *White Fragility*, is one of the best resources I've come across. It is instructive, truthful, helpful, challenging, and properly uncomfortable. I have literally had sleepless nights dissecting that discomfort, and working out how to not just leave this volume behind like yet another book, but apply it in my racial world. I am now more aware of the defensiveness and fragility that DiAngelo speaks of, and it has taught me

about myself. I have much, much more to learn about systemic racism. I have received a cajoling in which I must recognise my white privilege, amend my individual ways, and use that privilege vocationally, towards collective justice.

However, on the same grounds, I cannot endorse a broader intersectional ideology. It is not an effective pathway to real peace, or justice. In fact, I only see more despair, darkness, fracture, and pain when I see people move from an exploration of the world's evils, and a resolve to attend to them, to take on the posture of a more universal judge.

Maybe I'm mistaken. Maybe it's just my turn to learn about an everyday calculus of suffering, and to find myself at the bottom of the intersectional heap of those who have power and privilege. I mean, that's sort of what Jesus did.

But I also look for hope. And I have only ever found that in Jesus, in whom I have been made new. My identity is first in him – everything else has been, is being, and will be surrendered to him – and all will be made well in him. I look for the day when I can run to Jesus and easily find in my vicinity – running ahead, and already there – black, brown, and all manner of brothers and sisters, with whom we share the deepest love of all.

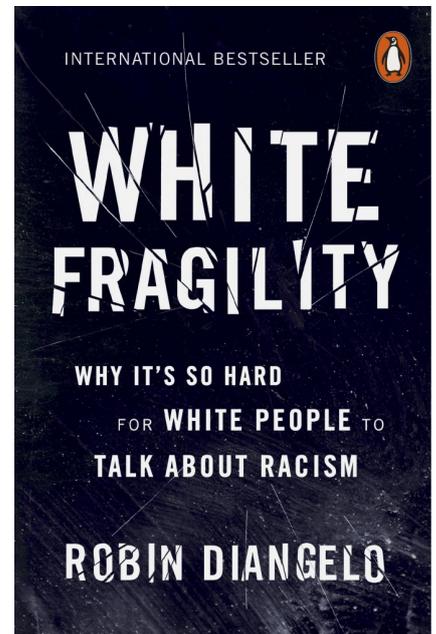
Without that hope, I fall apart. Maybe I'm fragile after all.

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**Review: White Fragility –  
Part 3a: Pursuing a dynamic**

# of resolve – religious resonance

This is the beginning of the third part of a multi-part review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. The topic of discussion is systemic racism and, in particular, the collective blindness of white people towards their racial bias. In my first part ([link](#)) I explored DiAngelo's observations by analogy with the phenomenon of classism. In the second part ([link](#)) I explored my own racial ignorance as a white person. DiAngelo does well to describe the *problem* of white fragility. In this part I am moving towards a focus on the question of "What we do in response?" This will be the subject of my final post. I am not looking for a quick easy-fix, but aspiring to a dynamic of resolve towards white people owning their part in the world in which we live.



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## Part 3a – Religious resonance

DiAngelo does well. It's hard to articulate a problem in a context beset by blindness. She's persistent, and holds our nose to it until we can smell it. It can be an unpleasant experience, but it's honest, and useful. But what does she imagine as a way forward?

At one level, it is obvious. DiAngelo is keen for white people to engage with "cross-racial skill building" (page 7), and hopes for when feedback about "our unaware yet inevitable racism" might be "graciously received" (page 113). I can

certainly get on board with that aspiration; emotional honesty and humility are graspable virtues! The guidelines she, herself, attempts to follow (page 125) are instructive for anyone in a position of power and privilege. Her own experience of “owning” her racism (page 145) is a demonstration of emotionally honest, humble, relational living. If only these were more prevalent! I want more of this in myself. I want more of this in the communities and churches in which I participate and lead!

What DiAngelo describes in her hoped-for response reflects aspects of what I might call “confession” and “grace.” The one who is at fault, owns the problem, and doesn’t deflect. The one who is harmed, in a context of freedom, may offer a gift of illumination and help increase understanding. “Having racist assumptions is inevitable (but possible to change), I will feel gratitude when an unaware racist assumption is pointed out...” (page 132). I need this. We all need this. If this is all that eventuates from books like this, that alone would be significant, and good!

My aim here, however, is to look a little deeper. To do that I am going to do my best to bring a Christian theological lens to bear. There will be some positive resonance, as well as some differences. However, before I proceed further, I need to recognise – and hopefully disclaim – a real phenomenon: I am becoming aware of how phrases such as “biblical worldview” and even “Christian” can intertwine with the exact forms of white privilege that DiAngelo has illuminated. Christianity has often (but far from always) played the part of the white man’s religion, and its forms have been used to sustain and justify segregation and white supremacy, just as DiAngelo has described. Even the beautiful eschatological vision of an ethnically diverse renewed humanity caught up together in eternal worship can be misused; “We are all one in Christ!” is over-realised eschatology, and harmful, when that unity is not actually present in the present. Is the truth and certainty

of ultimate renewal grounds for ignoring present sin? *me genoito!* Certainly not!

The Christian worldview can be perverted by whiteness, and my hope of disclaiming that is this: I sit at the brown-skinned feet of a crucified-and-risen man, reading the Scriptures that he read, upheld, and fulfilled. Within those pages I encounter and aspire to pathways of truth first walked by slaves, excluded women, African eunuchs, all manner of people who do not look like me. In the contemporary world I have received more spiritual food from the hermeneutics of black revivalism than the culturally-appropriating white-washed liberalism of the dominant ecclesial paradigm. I am far from fully sanctified, but this I know: Christian spirituality is not only a valid voice to hear, but a source of wisdom, more ancient, more universal, than any other perspective I've ever encountered. Moreover, it has a mystic ability to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and do the deep work beyond what we can ask or imagine. In its truest form, it is exactly what is needed to give sight to the racially blind.

The Biblical witness often harmonises with DiAngelo's position. Sometimes this is *against* the rhetoric of those who might claim a "Biblical worldview" but are actually far from it. For instance, an absolutist individualism is *not* biblical. DiAngelo posits a sense of both *collective guilt* and *individual complicity*: We aren't just "handed" our privilege as white people, the "systematic dimensions of racism... must be actively and passively, consciously and unconsciously, maintained" (page 64). The individual can't just simply deflect on to the collective; it is wrong to "exempt the person from any responsibility for or participation in the problem." (page 78). This is not a foreign theme in the Biblical narrative.

The Old Testament writings, especially, interweave that sense of systemic injustice into the deeper sense of idolatry and rebellion against the heart of God. Amongst myriad examples is

the prophet Amos (5:14) who cries, "Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is." That evil is not just individual moralism, it's against the "fat cows of Bashan" (Amos 4:1) who "make it hard to the poor." His summary introduction is against *Israel collectively* who "deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:7). The prophetic injunction is to a *people* – usually *God's people* – not just to individual persons. My few short words here are not enough to express it – go and read the Bible! But heed the heart of God that is revealed. God responds to collective as well as individual guilt. He will even broken-heartedly take his people, collectively, into exile, because of their unrepented injustice, and so seek a change in their heart and their ways. The Western church should take heed!

We *can* conceive of a people, experiencing systemic harm, crying out to God, "How long, oh Lord? Remember *us!*". We *can* conceive of him hearing, and heeding. There are some deep, deep expressions of this in the history of the black gospel movements. It is thoroughly biblical.

Moreover, God's gracious gospel invitation, in Jesus, is to belong as an individual to a unified collective. This is most profoundly expressed by the image of a "body" – a diversity of members in a dynamic whole. St. Paul, especially, uses this image (see 1 Corinthians 12), He expresses it in a way that upturns the normal social defaults of his day. The gospel invites us into this common-union and this invitation is not a matter of affirmed privilege, but a belonging-to-one-another life of kenotic (self-emptying) transformation.

DiAngelo's sense of collective guilt, and privileged complicity, therefore, should not offend us Christians. It's part of our worldview. When exploring ourselves racially, we would do well to pray, together, along with the psalmist, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and

lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-4). Or is that only about acceptably-white personal trespasses like drinking alcohol and fornicating?

Indeed, in my mind, the Biblical voices are more consistent than DiAngelo herself. This is certainly the case when it comes to grasping the concept of "guilt". DiAngelo appropriately uses this language, e.g. "Anti-blackness comes from deep *guilt* about what we have done and continue to do; the unbearable knowledge of our complicity with the profound torture of black people from past to present" (page 94, emphasis mine). Given that, it is utterly incongruous that towards the end of the book, she refuses the language for herself: "... I have a racist worldview, deep racial bias, racist patterns, and investments in the racist system that has elevated me. Still, *I don't feel guilty* about racism. I didn't chose [sic] this socialization, and it could not be avoided. But I am responsible for my role in it. to the degree that I have done my best in each moment to interrupt my participation, I can rest with a clearer conscience..." (page 149, emphasis mine). Perhaps, at this point, she is simply using it as a descriptor of emotion, i.e. "guilty feelings." Nevertheless, her entire book has revolved around an honesty about guilt, but, here, at the end she steps herself back and couches it in terms of self-justifying attempts at a clear conscience. "I've done my best" – isn't that a deflection?

The thing is, I don't think this undermines her argument. Like all of us, DiAngelo is fragile when faced with being counted as guilty. I don't disparage her for it. The Biblical voices are well-used to this phenomenon. A common objection to the gospel is the ever-present retort: "I don't need anyone's forgiveness, I've done my best!" In this way the gospel is more consistent than DiAngelo; the gospel will not let us ignore our complicity and guilt in the fracture of this world, including it's systems of injustice and pain. It will not even let us deflect towards our own good efforts. "All have fallen

short", Paul famously says (Romans 3:23).

The Biblical voice is also more robust than DiAngelo when it comes to *shame*. This a complex issue and there are two interwoven senses to understand. Firstly, shaming can be a malicious act of "othering" someone to diminish them and exercise power over them. But, secondly, someone can be "ashamed" in a healthy way, when they become aware not only of acting wrongly but having a *propensity* to act wrongly – i.e. that wrongness is in their character somehow. The gospel, literally, is about God entering into, inhabiting, and transforming our shame. It therefore relies on this second, honest, transformative sense. The gospel is rejected, however, when it is perceived in the first sense; when it is perceived as a malicious power-play, shame triggers our fragility, and we respond in defense. **It is absolutely evident, in *White Fragility*, DiAngelo is shaming white people,** because there *is* guilt and we *do* have a propensity to perpetuate the systemic injustice! I believe she is doing so with the transformative intent, but she is encountering the defenses of the other perception.

The Biblical voice *affirms* the possibility of white fragility. And why not? After all, we Christians have a deep heritage in studying sin! I may speak, theologically, of "original sin," or of an innate propensity to act selfishly and unjustly as part of our broken human community; I might even call this "depravity." DiAngelo speaks of "habitus", an interplay of free will and societal structures which maintains our comfort and equilibrium (page 103). I then might speak of the "heart being deceitful" (Jeremiah 17:9). Surely these concepts are not foreign to each other?

In fact, as a professional sin-studier, I might dare to offer a little advice: One of the critiques of DiAngelo's approach, in the sense that it doesn't *help* white people talk about racism, is her imprecision with regard to sin. I see this in her use of loaded terms like "white supremacy" applied almost

indiscriminately. It's a term that connotes overt acts of violence and assault. Yet, applied to broadly, it would also cover lesser sins such as a mildly-negligent use of racist idiom in a conversation. This doesn't excuse either act, but it is unhelpfully imprecise. I get that she's pushing towards a common root of systemic white superiority, and that is appropriate. But we Christians do that too, and we have learned the limits of it. Our word "sin" also has a broad semantic range, grounded in a common root, and it also can be applied to anything from the cruel, malicious, literally diabolic oppressions of human empire, through to the complex inclinations of an otherwise innocent thought life. I've reflected it on that previously, and have suggested that we needed adjustments in our phraseology in order to communicate our intent, open the door to repentance and change, and not trigger misunderstanding and defensiveness. We don't want to *ignore* sin and shame, but we also actually want to *break* the shame-cycle, not reinforce it.

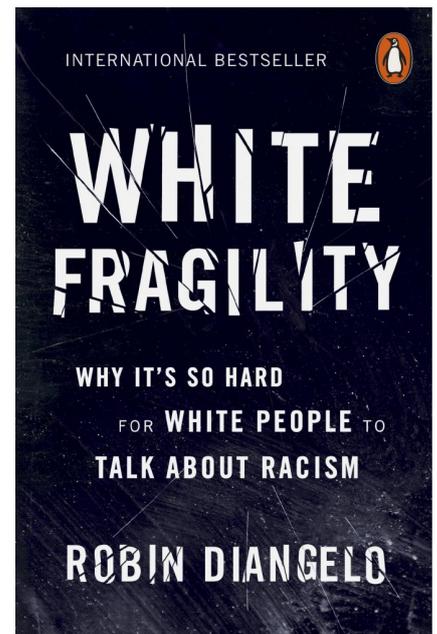
Nevertheless, the Biblical voice does recognise the times when the root cause of sin needs to be revealed. DiAngelo uses a big stick, and it's likely warranted. Jesus himself, tired of the religious deflections and excuses of his day, also uses amplification to uncover what is hidden and persistent: "You have heard it said, do not murder... but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.." (Matthew 5:21). You can't hide behind "done my best" and "I'm not a racist", you must examine the heart and the root of the matter.

There is much that resonates between DiAngelo and the Biblical voice. But there is some discord also, particularly at the ideological level. DiAngelo has wisdom and insight, but the Biblical voices, in the end, offer more hope and a clearer way forward. This will be the subject of the final part of my engagement with *White Fragility*.

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# Review: White Fragility – Part 2: Exploring my ignorance

This is the second part of a multi-part review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. This book explores how *white* people struggle to engage with the reality of racism in our society; we do not understand ourselves racially, and are blind to how we participate in and contribute to inequality and the manifest bias against people of colour. In the first part ([link](#)) of my review I attempted to grasp DiAngelo's argument by using analogy; I correlated her observations regarding white racism with the cultural blindness of the English middle class. In this part I now seek to apply DiAngelo's points to myself; I admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience.



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## Part 2 – Exploring my ignorance.

A book like this cannot be read objectively. The main point of my analogy, in the first part, is to demonstrate why I, myself, might be racially unaware, and unable to taste the water I'm swimming in.

To that end, I need to admit to some anxiety. I don't *feel* the

privilege of being of white. I know that, relatively speaking to so many others, I *am* privileged. Many of these privileges, ironically, are attached to assumptions of middle class success. But I don't feel the *racial* privilege. I have seen acts of racism against my friends and neighbours, and, perhaps, have some internal gratitude that I don't have to weather those storms. But race isn't embedded in the calculus of my life.

Instead, my self-awareness, (and I'm confident I'm not alone in this), attends to where I *do* feel underprivileged. I am, for instance, an immigrant outsider to self-seeding ecclesial networks, my path did not lead to cushy jobs (which, to be fair, I no longer aspire to) or obvious financial security, and I've never worn an old school tie in my life! Like the anecdotal antagonist on DiAngelo's very first page ("A white person can't get a job anymore!"), I do not *feel* empowered. In fact, I often feel *excluded*, in particular, by those with the formal and informal power to categorise me – and perhaps even "cancel" me – because of a privilege (white, male, straight) that I never asked for, and can do nothing about. And, in complete awareness that I am writing this freely and publicly, and that I literally own a right to a public-speaking platform – I often feel *voiceless*, unheard, ignorable, different, alone.

But this is exactly where I think DiAngelo has a valid exhortation: **It's my job to get over that anxiety, and, to be honest, to get over myself!** Perhaps there *is* some injustice in my own broader experience, but that does not give me an "out" by which I can ignore other exclusionary dynamics, particularly racial ones, in which, whether I like it or not, I am a participant and a beneficiary.

What I have realised, from this book, is that with regard to racism, I have much to learn. I hadn't clocked, for instance, how something as ostensibly benign as "white women's tears" (page 134) could actually, and understandably, express racial

power dynamics. That example clicked on a small light, and left me thinking, "if that is the case, then what else?"

A helpful pathway into my ignorance was the correlation with gender. I cannot be "colour-blind" in my relationships, just as I cannot be "gender-blind" (see page 81). The *bias* is there; for any number of reasons I will relate to a woman differently than to a man. The vast majority of those reasons are socially accepted, therefore I can admit to them, process them, and adjust them to ensure that they are not deleterious to anyone, including myself. But DiAngelo is right: As a white person, I have not had the opportunity or particular inclination to examine my racial bias. That effective denial of bias "ensures that we won't examine or change them" (page 11). In short, I need to "name my race."

*... a critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.*

*(Page 7)*

To be clear, I am not on some crusade of virtuous self-flagellation here. I can make some robust assessment of myself: I truly don't think I am guilty of overt or even aversive racism; I don't *consciously* exhibit "racial disdain that surfaces in [my] daily discourse" (page 45). Similarly, I *don't* share all of DiAngelo's experiences. She reflects that "not one person who loved me, guided me, or taught me ever conveyed that segregation deprived me of anything of value" (page 67). That is simply not my personal experience. In fact, the opposite is true; my wife and I have experienced a diversity of cultural contexts, including ones that are multiracial, and when we find ourselves confined to an echo-chamber of progressive liberal whiteness we *feel* the

deprivation of that segregation. And let me tell you about how the prophetic presence of an Iranian community impacted a previously pale church community one day!

However, as DiAngelo reinforces, racism is a system, not an event. It pertains not to my individual experience, but to the privilege of my racial class, a class which was *invented* by white colonials in order to protect that privilege. The ignorance I need to reflect on relates to my *complicity* to this system, this world. To a large degree, this is necessarily about admitting ignorance and deliberately informing myself.

I can, for instance, reflect on what DiAngelo presents as the “common set of racial patterns” engendered by our socialisation (page 68). These are characteristics of the white collective, things like “preference for racial segregation”, a “lack of understanding of what racism is”, and “seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization.” I can observe aspects of these in myself. I know, for instance, that I have “focused on intentions over impact”; I can remember nervously washing away someone’s awkward casual racist remark by asserting that “no harm was meant.” In other ways, I’m open to instruction. I don’t think I have, for instance, a submerged and “internalised assumption of racial superiority” (page 55), but would be glad to have it revealed to me. I’d rather deal with it, if it’s there, than pretend it away. In this way it is more uncomfortable, and also more useful, to be open to my complicity in the disproportionate advancement of white people as a collective.

The reality is that I simply do not have to think about being white. For sure, I live in a multicultural area, and I can see how my race might be impediment for certain church activities; to that extent I *realise* I am white. But I don’t have to *think* about it. As I think and dream and imagine my life, my *whiteness* is simply not a factor. To that extent, I *am* a beneficiary of some key sociological resources, of “self-

worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom from the tether of race, freedom of movement, the sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement to all of the above" (page 25).

I had assumed that this book was, in the main, going to give me an insight into the lived experience of people of colour. It does, of course, do that to some extent. But that is not the point; its intent is to give an insight into the *white* lived experience of ignoring or diminishing people of colour. It is actually more confronting. If it had been a book on how ethnic minorities experience racism, it may have left me informed, perhaps even angered, but, in the end, only *objectively*. In fact, I would have likely had a moment of self-congratulation for being open to understanding the plight of my non-white brother and sisters. *White Fragility* is more prophetic than that; it holds *our* feet *in* the racial story, so that we might understand *our* part.

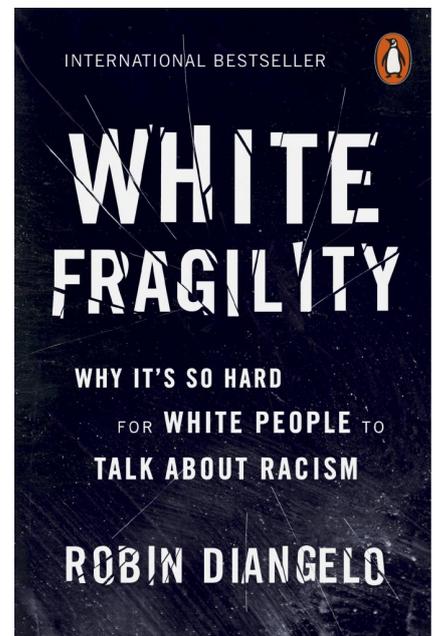
Truth, however, takes a while to inhabit and explore. DiAngelo has given me a map of my ignorance, but it's up to me walk those trails myself. Like all maps, it turns what is unknown into "known unknowns". This book has given me the lie of the land of the racial privilege from which I benefit, the extent of my likely unconscious complicity, and, to a certain degree, what I might do about it.

However, it's that last question – what to do about it – where DiAngelo is less helpful. If I may draw on a religious example: *White Fragility* is like God's good law; it rightly, justly, appropriately, reveals what is wrong and our part in it... and yet I sense little power by which it can make things right. I will explore this further in the next part.

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# Review: White Fragility – Part 1: Understanding by analogy

I'm reviewing this book with some trepidation. It is far from my field of expertise. It is not a Christian book. It interacts with a topic that invokes emotional as well thoughtful response. It's a serious book about serious things with which we must seriously engage.



The broad issue that *White Fragility* touches upon, of course, is systemic and cultural racism. We might instantly think, therefore, that the focus is on people of colour. That's a telling assumption which raises the exact issue that the author is focused on, as per the subtitle: The problem is "Why it's so hard for *white* people to talk about racism."

The author is Robin DiAngelo, an academic and a professional in the area of diversity training. The illustrative anecdotes she brings from her experience ground her discourse. It's unfortunate that this attaches the book very closely to the US context, but that does not diminish its value for the broader Western and post-colonial world.

My reflections are going to come in a number of parts, spread out over a number of posts on this blog. I will be "wrestling out loud", so to speak, and doing so in response to the DiAngelo's focus. She is articulating an observation about

white people, and I am a white person. I have gone through some difficult introspection as a result of this book, but I am not laying claim to any emotional hardship. In all that follows, I will simply be seeking to follow the aim of my blog; it's a "wild attempt at thinking things through." We live in a racially charged world which white people are often blind to, or deny – this is our *white fragility*. What are the dynamics behind that? How might we own what we need to own up to and act upon it well? I welcome any feedback and critique. I am on a learning curve.

My intention is to engage with this book in three ways. The first part is included below. The second and third part will come in subsequent posts, which I will link here when they are uploaded: Part 2, Part 3a, Part 3b

Firstly, in this post, I am going to try and **understand by analogy**. I will be drawing on my own experience of being an immigrant and of English classism. I want to be clear: I am not pretending that there is any equivalence between my experience and that of people of colour. I am, however, seeking to understand DiAngelo by applying her thoughts to something that is within my own comprehension. I participated in some racial awareness training recently and it affirmed a similar approach; being aware of when we ourselves have been "othered" can, if held well, use empathy as a bridge to understanding.

Secondly, in a subsequent post, I'm going to try and **admit my ignorance**. This book *does* challenge and confront white people, and I am a white person. Having done my best to understand what the author is saying, I will aspire to allow myself to be undone by it, and examine myself racially. At the very least, I will try and find the bounds of my what I do not know.

Thirdly, in a one subsequent post, and then another, I will **seek a dynamic of resolution**. I come to this as someone aspiring to be a disciple of Jesus. This fundamentally forms

and shapes how I will explore and interact with DiAngelo's approach. I will discover much that mutually affirms, and also some philosophical collisions. Please note: I am not looking for a simplistic *solution* here, but what I'm calling a *dynamic resolution*, i.e. a pathway ahead towards what is *right*, to which I, for my part, can aspire.

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## **Part 1 – Understanding by Analogy**

When my family and I arrived in the UK in 2015 we found ourselves in the middle of "Middle England." It was a significant cultural collision. We made many mistakes, and we sought to educate ourselves. Our encounter was with the sociological collective that we might generally call "The Middle Class." At the time, I wrote about some of the reading I'd done as I struggled to understand.

I'm mentioning this *not* because I think there is an equivalence between classism and racism. Rather, it is a reflection using analogy; my understanding of one thing will inform my understanding of another thing. I have found myself agreeing with much of what DiAngelo says about white people *because* I have seen similar dynamics within the English middle class. I am also aware that I have only seen these because, as an immigrant, I have straddled the boundary of being on the "inside" and the "outside" of the normative group. But let me say it again: I am not conflating. A white immigrant's experiences are grounded in aspects of identity, (e.g. accent, cultural presumptions), that are often *positively* received and generally excused or overlooked. All that my experience affords, if anything, is a glimpse under the sociological hood.

For instance, DiAngelo asserts from the very beginning that "being white has meaning" (page 2). As a group, white people do not see themselves as a racial category, but rather as a

racial *norm*. This is a confronting truth. Many white people would dismiss it as a nonsense. I may have included myself in that number at one point but, from my cross-cultural experience, I now know what it means for a class of people to be blind to themselves while classifying others. I can grasp a little of the *concept* of whiteness in this regard, even if I can't fully appreciate the impact of it.

Those on the inside of a "normative class" cannot taste the water they swim in. Immigrants do. In order to process the dynamics of their new situation, *generalisations* are needed: We have to be able to make conclusions: "Middle class English people exhibit a certain behaviour." This is necessary in order to navigate the world we have landed in and so minimise social and psychological injury. It does *not* mean that every middle class individual person acts that way. Similarly, DiAngelo, generalises about race, and unashamedly so (page 11). It offends the "cardinal rule of individualism" and our visceral white, middle class hatred of being managed as a herd. Yet we *do* act with some herd-like dynamics, and a lack of awareness is part of the problem. Those dynamics are maintained through what DiAngelo calls "socialization"; "we make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens" (page 9). Immigrants have to learn these perceptions, but for the dominant culture they just "are", and are often unexamined.

Why this blindness? In the middle class there is often an underlying foundation of fear and shame: the fear of never quite being secure enough, and the shame of being comfortable when others are desperate. DiAngelo, speaking of whiteness, identifies defining ideologies such as *individualism* and *objectivity*. I can also detect these within the middle class; as a member of that group I learn (i.e. am socialised) to think of myself as fully in control of my own destiny, and able to impartially assess myself and others. By these means I can divest myself of responsibility for

another's misfortune, protect myself from their fate through objective assertions of why they are lesser, and unconsciously invest in a system that will maintain my conclusions. If we disrupt this system, we disrupt some deeply held self-protections; we are *fragile*. I can therefore comprehend why DiAngelo asserts: "We need to discuss white people as a group – even if doing so jars us – in order to disrupt our unracialized identities" (page 89).

*I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. And in light of so many white expressions of resentment toward people of color, I realized that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve; I saw our investment in a system that serves us.*

*(Pages 3-4)*

There are other analogical correlations as well. DiAngelo asserts that racism is "a structure not an event" (page 20). I find it interesting, and helpful, that her references to *overt* acts of racism are usually the illustrative *beginnings* to her broader argument; the overt is used to reveal the related, covert, hidden, systems. Again, without conflating, there is a correlation in classism: Overt acts of snobbery are relatively rare, and, after all, "it's not like we put people in the workhouses anymore." We do, however, define success, and restrict the pathways to it, in ways that "help" people to know their place and stay there. I can conceive of what DiAngelo means when she talks about "new racism", "a term coined... to capture the ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist" (page 39).

DiAngelo asserts that the “social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need” include “the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighbourhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity” (page 8). I can elucidate at least one analogical example from this list: My children have gone to a good school and can do so by virtue of our address. We do, however, live in a “poor neighbourhood.” At some point the school’s catchment was arranged to include this neighbourhood. I suspect it was a deliberate attempt to help the lower classes. But here’s the observation: it is the children from the poorer, multi-racial neighbourhoods which are required to travel two miles uphill to get to the campus. It sits and belongs in the middle of a more affluent suburb. This is not an overt act of classism (or even racism in this case); nobody has said “let’s make it difficult for the poor kids and the BAME kids to get to school.” But somehow it’s ended up that way. It’s not the only example in the city I live in.

Here’s another correlation: DiAngelo asserts, “I believe *white progressives cause the most daily damage of people of color*” (page 5, her emphasis). Her point, as I understand it, references those who see the evil in overt racism, and decry it, yet, in failing to realise their own complicity in systemic racism, end up reinforcing it. The correlation in classism is with regard to those who “care for the poor” in some way. I see this in church circles all the time; even when it is manifested in good things such as food banks, there is, so often, an entrenched “client-patron” model at work. It is unspoken but real: “I am here to help you. I am normal. You are a poor person.”

“White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness,

all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism” (page 112). DiAngelo is not speaking nonsense. I’ve seen this dynamic with respect to class. But now I must seek to understand it with respect to race and my own whiteness. I need my equilibrium disturbed. When it comes to understanding racism, I must admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience. In other words, I am likely to be unaware, and unable to taste the water I’m swimming in.

I must turn away from my known analogy, and do my best to understand myself racially. This will be the content of my second part.