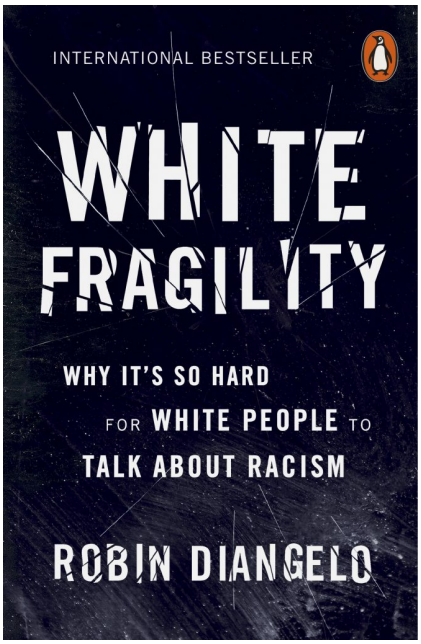
Review: White Fragility – Part 3b: Pursuing a dynamic resolve – vocation and identity



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.

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 the 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 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 or 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 a 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 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.