

Chapter Five

Coolness between Virtue Ethics and Aesthetics

Cool a Virtue?

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

“Victorian Cool”

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

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

Virtue Ethics, Character, and Values

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

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

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

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

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

Coolness as a Virtue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Values in Philosophy

It is necessary to introduce a theory of values that has developed a concept of value independently of ethical categorizations such as the good or virtue.
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Notes

1. In *Ladies' Home Journal* 38, August 1921, p. 16, quoted from Lemke 1998: 63.