

Into the Fire

The Intersection of Race and Communication

Editor and Series Editor

Leland Harper

Siena Heights University

Series in Philosophy of Race



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1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy of Race

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025942770

ISBN: 979-8-8819-0328-2

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Introduction:

Restoring Our Humanity

Eddy Souffrant
Africana Studies Department

The African, the African American experience, is silenced in the abstractions of the modern European and Euro-American philosophy on the count that philosophy is universal. The experience of Africans and African American peoples is thus deemed peculiar, particular to the members of those groups. A philosophy that emanates from such a peculiar experience would be, by definition, not universal.

This volume argues for a recognition of that silence and of its causes, to propose that folks of both African and European descent, even if by proxy, admit that the modern experience, by its very nature, has encouraged a bifurcation in the field of Philosophy. The resultant philosophies that emerge from such an experience would, in our case, place on one side something that could be considered part of hyphenated African (African-American, Africana) Philosophy, and a (*Modern/ Traditional*) Euro-American Philosophy on the other side. These plural philosophies are contentious in large part because the latter hyphenated philosophy promotes a universal quality that is, in the end, challenged, at least in our contemporary period, by the multiple alternatives that are themselves also consistent with the modern experience.

The modern experience has also informed on this American side of the Atlantic, novel conceptions of Afro-American identity. They, in turn, have motivated a practice of professional philosophy that benefits from the history, experience, and literature of Afro-descended peoples and other worldly intellectuals. These informed practices of philosophy have questioned and cultivated the sources of the silence imposed by Euro-American Philosophy and have begun to pierce through its obstinacy.

Harper's work, in particular, considers both an additional way in which the silence is revealed and also contemplates the implications of the silence and its revelation for our contemporary social and political philosophy. In addition, this collection of essays offers one important contemporary approach to a solution to the pervasive negative unitary notions of identity that envelop our contemporary American polity. The collection helps us think about multiple identities.

Our Legacy of Violence

Colonial and imperial endeavors are brutal. It is thus not only easy to recognize that brutality, but it is also equally easy to attempt a justification for it by proposing that even if populations, individuals, and families were decimated, or simply brutalized psychologically or physically, we should have to acknowledge the goods that colonization has wrought. Furthermore, one of its incontestable goods is the advent of modernity. So even if colonization involves the extermination of some, a greater good has come of it, our contemporary existence.

I contend that the brutality of the process of colonization, despite its aftermath of the period of enlightenment and modernity, has remained a significant component of our contemporary world. Rather than proposing that some goods are possible with modernity, the work here maintains that, in the interest of prospective coexistence, we should contemplate and uncover the silences that have been perpetrated at the price of the goods we choose to highlight in this emergence of the enlightenment and modernity.

The editor and the contributors to this volume propose to explore the legacy of racism in order to present an emancipatory effort that facilitates a liberation from racial and racist thinking. They explain how a critical assessment of race and communication will help marshal creative analyses of concepts ranging from slavery, race, ethnicity, to feminism that will help uncover the hierarchization of humanity that has served in part as the foundation for the categorization of persons of African descent as the embodiment of evil. It bears mentioning that in accordance with some interpretations of Christian religious literature, evil itself was already determined in some readings of the scriptures, and in the imaginary literature, as black. A black believed to be incarnate in the *Black*, non-ethnic-European individual.

The modern conception of identity that emerged from these encounters with literature and populations helped crystallize the European conception of itself as it *othered* the other natives. So, the structure of the world that we have inherited results from the communication, the interaction with other natives. Europe is forming as these various communal entities are contacted and forced to take part in the nascent self-awareness and the commercialization that fuel modernity, now construed in the aftermath of these encounters as European modernity. As these communal entities, both European and non-European, are impacted by the contact and the brutality it wrought, the trafficking of *enslaved* individuals helped replace the decimated indigenous communities on some of the routes of the encounters. It should be clear that a number of interactions are engendered here.

We know of the tension between Black and White in the U.S.A. Harper has managed to capture here in this volume a snapshot of the resulting condition we experience in this part of the Continent. Despite the recognition that there are no natural slaves, and, furthermore, that slaves are not identical with the racial category *Black*, if ever such a category existed, we have maintained in this post-Enlightenment period the designation of some, as colored, and the equation of the beings so lodged with a fixed nature, to claim a causal relation between their being and their *natural* and/or ordained subservience and inferiority.

The violence of racialization, exhibited in these prefatory remarks, coheres with René Girard's work but with one wrinkle. Girard recognizes violence, but rather than think of it like I and others do, as constitutive of the Enlightenment and Modern era, he instead sees the violence as endemic to every human society. For him, violence is amplifying. In a way reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes, he holds that our basic nature is destructive (read violence) and that we are mimetic creatures. Continuing the legacy of violence, but this time drawing from psychoanalysis, he, following Freud this time, maintains that we are redeemed by a creative destruction. The latter tempers individual violence and facilitates community by facilitating a peaceful or livable community.

Since individuals cannot fully discard or eradicate their inherent violent streak, they deflect/transfer the violence against each other to another, weaker individual or group who is less likely to retaliate. Peace within a community of brutal individuals is thus achieved by identifying a literal or figurative scapegoat who will absorb the violence that one would have directed toward our fellow community members.

The violence under the Girardian scenario is well transferred and distant. The violence is further contained by scapegoating it, and in its deflection, a version of peace or peaceful coexistence is reached, regardless of the effect of the deflected violence on *the viability of those othered*. If we take seriously the position of René Girard¹, we have a sense of the manner in which nationalism can rise. It is further a nationalism that favors a narrative for the burgeoning nations of Europe. Notice the dual aspect of this nationalism. It favors a self-centeredness that also doubles as it highlights the scapegoating of the *other*. In that egotistic approach to nation-building, cultural trends do play a significant role in the manner in which these communities conceive of themselves and as they consider paths to the realization of their goals.

The work of Harper et. al. responds to the Hobbesian/Girardian view of our human nature and suggests that the violent racism that we have borrowed from the Enlightenment and Modern northern America, and that we harbor still, does not constitute our last chapter. These colleagues thus propose a way forward from racism. They suggest that every generation, and every moment

in history, is challenged to reinvigorate the thrust that human beings have to express themselves in some fashion, or perhaps better said, to express themselves against the fashioned nativism, the particularism and singularity of their time. There are thus bound to be alternative conceptions of ways of being human, and this, despite the Modern project's narrow conceptions of the possibilities for selves.

The Chapters

Harper and colleagues are gathered in this volume not only to present possibilities of better selves but also to propose a way for our collective co-existence. So, against the backdrop of violence, the essays they have collected in *Into the Fire: The Intersection of Race and Communication* address some of the interplays of race and communication.

Harper and Kling open this collection of essays with a chapter titled: "The Semantic Foundations of White Fragility and the Consequences for Justice." In this co-authored and layered chapter, Harper and Kling extend Robin DiAngelo's coined phenomenon of *white fragility*. They apply DiAngelo's concept to a more general conception of justice. They argue that white fragility is caused by the lack of proper terminology to discuss issues related to the practice of racism. As a result, this lack of proper terminology keeps discussion of racism from producing meaningful changes. In a second phase, the chapter applies *white fragility* to some of Michelle Alexander's positions. They argue, following Alexander, that "white fragility perpetuates blacks' absence in the halls of power where justice is considered and articulated." They believe that white fragility keeps members of the black community from having a say in who determines how "justice is to be viewed, interpreted, carried out, or to whom it applies, in the United States." They conclude that this lack of access, this exclusion from the democratic deliberation about justice and its application, and to no one's surprise, helps sustain the racist achievement and wealth gap that we witness in the United States.

Harper and Kling's essay leads well to Joseph Frigault's discussion of reparation. In Frigault's "Putting Whiteness First? Why Reparations Discourse Needs a Critique of White Advantage," he observes that American whites, who oppose reparations and other forms of race-conscious policy, offer what he deems to be socio-argumentative challenges. Reparations and race-conscious policies tap into the perceived threats that such policies present to white self-image and group identity. Frigault proposes a tactical counter to appease the fragility and fear that whites cherish. He suggests that reparations arguments should be couched in terms of white advantage, rather than Black disadvantage. By so doing, policy makers who wish to consider reparation would help whites see themselves as non-voluntarily participants in the sustenance of racialized

structures. That self-awareness can be admitted, according to Frigault, without triggering defensiveness. Appeasing whites in that way will move the nation, so Frigault thinks, toward a “robust political engagement with its long history of racial injustice.”

Talks of racial justice or injustice cannot overlook the psychological impact of the persistent illness that racism reflects.

While Frigault reinforces white fragility, Felipe E. Oliveira continues with his “Whitesplaining and Racesplaining: A Philosophical Account” to help us consider some of the effects of psychological racism. Oliveira’s analysis accounts for the necessary and sufficient conditions for *racesplaining*. For him, racesplaining occurs in “any conversational exchange between agent A and a purported agent B, about subject s”. He holds that A racesplains s to B if and only if (i) A explains s to B, (ii) A explains s to B because of A’s racial bias against a racial identity R1 directed towards B, and favorable bias towards a racial identity R2 directed towards A.” It is “a fully internalist phenomenon” where hierarchy of racial position is presumed and motivates one’s psychological attitude in social communication.

Casey Rentmeester provides the reader with an additional analogical argument that likens blackwashing to greenwashing. In this chapter, Rentmeester appeals to canonical figures of Western philosophy and contemporary critical race theory scholars to speak on the prevalence of pro-social justice messaging in the post-George Floyd era. The messaging objectifies and capitalizes on Black bodies. Ultimately, Rentmeester positions this practice of objectifying Black bodies for profit as deceptive, unethical, and denounces the messaging as a practice that undermines the BLM movement.

Elizabeth LaFray, for her part, makes a good case for democratic education in light of white fragility and the persistence of psychological racism. In her own piece, “‘The Revised School Code’: Educational Standards and Communicating About Race in the United States,” LaFray demonstrates that school-aged children in the U.S.A. learn about the socio-political engines of the society in the first years of elementary school. She reminds us that although that goal is agreed upon, in principle, by all states, however, since 2018, state legislatures across the United States have sought to restrict and revise the content and teaching practices within the social studies. The states have reacted in consort with the backlash against Critical Race theory and the 1619 Project.” As a result, States have adopted laws to prevent open classroom discussions of race, racism, gender, etc. LaFray’s essay argues that these legislative efforts to restrict the content of what students learn in public school limit their “knowledge as citizens, but also endangers their ability to participate in the process of democracy.” In this way, all, regardless of race, gender, or economic status, are disadvantaged by such restrictive efforts.

As we consider knowledge transmission in this collection, Violet Victoria's "Building Systems Resilient to Biased Epistemic Agents" addresses a space wherein race and communication negatively intersect. She argues that in "epistemic 'ecosystems' in which agents of communication are biased, knowledge acquisition is negatively impacted." She is convinced that knowledge transmission from one to another depends on our trusting that our interlocutors are sharing something of value. Biased interlocutors impact our trust and consequently our belief in the value of their knowledge. The author proposes that social activists, as well as "epistemologists and ethicists should focus on institutional interventions to combat this issue."

Epistemic injustice, as an underlying topic of Victoria's essay, is inextricably linked to topics of racialized experience. Erica Preston-Roedder addresses this link, but in relation to the multiracial experience. She introduces and frames the concept of racial denials as instances of epistemic injustice, and brings to light a persistent theme in the lived experiences and identity conceptualization of multiracial individuals. She holds that racial denials damage these individuals' capacities as knowers and communicators.

Certainly, in order to reach a post racist society or world, we will need to check the periodic jets of racism that permeate our quotidian environments. We are reminded of such quotidian lapses by the gaffs, subliminal or intentional, that some of our public speakers exhibit. Gabriel Andrade's "Revisiting the Case of Jimmy the Greek in the George Floyd Era: Sports, Racism, Media and Freedom of Speech" takes us into a little-explored territory, systemic racism in sports. Andrade's work questions the place of systemic racism in the world of Sports in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder. He holds that the racist myths concerning the black athlete's natural athletic superiority persist. He evaluates and refutes the common arguments typically posited in favor of the thesis of natural black athletic superiority and questions the extent to which concepts of freedom of speech should hold when sports broadcasters publicly defend and thus, perpetuate the "myth of black natural athletic superiority." The character of Jimmy the Greek famously held that view and espoused in public and on television that black athletes had a special oil in their knees that justified their fast running.

In Conclusion

Into the Fire: The Intersection of Race and Communication is a wonderful collection of essays that I think will accompany the reader in their exploration and consideration of race in the contemporary period, and in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. It tells us convincingly that White fragility mutes Black people. White fragility, the phenomenon coined by Robin DiAngelo, is also a topic of discourse that is embedded in a binarily racialized society. As such, the

consideration of communication that the editor introduces in this collection should facilitate both Black emancipation and collective dialogue on race, by pointing to the conscious steps we might follow in a democratic society that aspires to be non-racist.

This book offers such steps. It proposes first that speech hurts and perpetuates racism. To undo the hurts, one might engage in ethical listening that helps promote trustworthiness between the parties involved. That ethical listening, however, is practiced with difficulty in a society in which racism is buttressed by Laws is not a novel concept. The editor argues that training and educating the future generation would benefit from a practiced democracy that promotes an equitable educational system and a common intellectual base from which to do the work of democracy. All the while being mindful that the democratic work is difficult, especially if it is hampered by psychological and epistemic conditioning that facilitate *racessplaining* and undermine the possibility of fruitful communication with our fellow human beings. Racialized or racist presumptions about our fellows prevent trust and ultimately inhibit the sharing and establishing of a common ground.

Perhaps, then, if we want to propose or establish a post-racist or post-racial society, we might want to adopt a post-racist theory that does not perpetuate the fatalism that erodes not only our own viability but also that of the society in which we exist together. Would such a post-racist society entail an active Black reparations Justice that aims to undo the scaffolding of systemic racism? Might such a society propose as an alternative a more, on the face of it, accommodating posture of monitoring our languages and expressions so as not to offend Whites or better yet, might the society laugh off the fragility that whites purport to harbor and restore a civil society where racism, is a relic of a bygone era, and best handled by cultivating a proper comedic disposition on racist attitudes and behaviors?

Chapter 1

The Semantic Foundations of White Fragility and the Consequences for Justice

Jennifer Kling
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Abstract

This essay extends Robin DiAngelo's concept of white fragility in two directions. First, we outline an additional cause of white fragility. The lack of proper terminology available to discuss race-based situations creates a semantic false dichotomy, which often results in an inability to discuss issues of racism in a way that is likely to have positive consequences, either for interpersonal relationships or for social and political change. Second, we argue that white fragility, with its semantic foundations, has serious consequences for racial justice. It perpetuates the mass incarceration of black Americans and undergirds the knowledge gap and subsequent wealth gap. The result of these racial injustices, which are maintained partially through white fragility, is that black Americans do not live in a democracy; they neither occupy positions of social and political power, nor have the ability to obtain power or directly impact who does obtain power.

Keywords: white fragility; race; racism; semantics; justice

Discussion, judgment, or categorization of any situations that contain even a hint of racial undertones, that many of us are likely to encounter in our daily lives, is limited to a very narrow set of terms.¹ In assessing these race-based situations, we are often forced to categorize them in one of two ways: racist or not racist.²

¹ Originally published in *Res Philosophica* 97, no. 2 (April 2020): 325-44. Reprinted with permission.

² There is the broader categorization *microaggression* that is sometimes used to describe these situations; however, that is not a sufficient term either, because it generally either

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About the Authors

Leland Harper received a PhD from the University of Birmingham (UK) and is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy at Siena Heights University. His areas of research include philosophy of religion, particularly issues in the epistemic status of religious experience, and philosophy of race, particularly issues in racism, racial solidarity and injustice. He is co-author (with Jennifer Kling) of *Racist, Not Racist, Antiracist: Language and the Dynamic Disaster of American Racism* (Lexington, 2022), the author of *Multiverse Deism: Shifting Perspectives of God and the World* (Lexington, 2020), as well as articles in *Res Philosophica*, *Forum Philosophicum*, *Global Discourse*, and *The International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*. He is also the editor of *The Crisis of American Democracy: Essays on a Failing Institution* (Vernon, 2022) and the series editor of the *Philosophy of Race* series at Vernon Press. Dr. Harper's work has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, and the Heller Center for Arts and Humanities. He is the organizer of the Great Lakes Philosophy Conference, an annual international interdisciplinary conference, and the founder of Leland Harper Consulting, a Toronto-based consulting firm specializing in diversity, equity, inclusion and antiracism.

Gabriel Andrade received a PhD from the University of Zulia (Venezuela) in 2008. He worked as a Titular Professor at the University of Zulia from 2005 to 2015. He then moved on to teach in the College of the Marshall Islands (Republic of the Marshall Islands), Xavier University School of Medicine (Aruba), and St. Matthew's University School of Medicine (Cayman Islands). He joined Ajman University in August 2019. His main area of research is Ethics and Psychology in a medical context.

Joseph Frigault is Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. His primary research is in social and political philosophy, philosophy of law, and critical philosophy of race, especially issues related to wrongful benefiting, political responsibility for group-based injustice (structural and particular), the moral and political psychology of privilege, and the normative significance of the past. Recently, the central concern uniting his research has been a focus on whiteness as a key impediment to the achievement of reparative racial justice. He is also interested in feminist philosophy, metaethics, the philosophy of science, pragmatism and the American philosophical tradition more broadly. His approach to these topics combines theoretical and practical dimensions and is thoroughly interdisciplinary, frequently drawing on work in the social and behavioral sciences. He holds degrees in philosophy from Mount

Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada, the University of British Columbia, and Boston University, where he completed his dissertation in 2020, under the supervision of David Lyons, Ann Cudd, and Juliet Floyd, and has taught previously at Coker University in South Carolina, and the University of Colorado, Boulder. His first book, forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan, is entitled *Whiteness, Fair Play, and Reparation: Toward a Political Inroad*.

Jennifer Kling is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Legal Studies at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Her research focuses on social and political philosophy, particularly issues in war and peace, protest, feminism, and philosophy of race. She is the author of *Can War Be Justified? A Debate* (with Andrew Fiala, Routledge 2023), *Racist, Not Racist, Antiracist: Language and the Dynamic Disaster of American Racism* (with Leland Harper, Lexington 2022), *The Philosophy of Protest: Fighting for Justice without Going to War* (with Megan Mitchell, Rowman & Littlefield 2021), *War Refugees: Risk, Justice, and Moral Responsibility* (Lexington 2019), and numerous articles in academic journals and edited collections. She is also the President (2024-2025) of Concerned Philosophers for Peace, the largest, most active organization of professional philosophers in North America involved in the analysis of the causes of war and prospects for peace.

Elizabeth LaFray is a historian, educator, and higher education administrator whose scholarly work and practice center on interdisciplinary themes in history, philosophy, and classics. She earned her PhD in History from Central Michigan University in 2014. As an Associate Professor of History at Siena Heights University, she developed and taught courses on United States History, Ancient Mediterranean History, European History, and World History, among many others. She served as a stakeholder on the Social Studies Teacher Preparation Standards Committee for the Michigan Department of Education from 2021-2022. She continues to teach on a part-time basis at Eastern Michigan University and currently manages the Inclusive Leaders Pathway for the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. Her work in an administrative role has affirmed that the practices and skills developed in the study of history are immensely valuable. Critical thinking, information synthesis, data analysis, recognizing patterns, and detecting fallacies are skills that enhance not only one's ability to understand the past but also one's ability to recognize the common human experience across time periods, cultures, languages, and societies.

Felipe E. Oliveira is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at Syracuse University. His main areas of research are the intersection of ethics and epistemology (especially theories that explain doxastic normativity), and the application of ethical and epistemological frameworks to issues in philosophy of race and gender, as well as social and political philosophy. His work on doxastic normativity defends a

new ethics of belief theory called Impure Evidentialism. According to this view, all of our doxastic obligations about whether we ought to believe, disbelieve, or withhold belief, are determined by our reasons for and against belief—what we take to be evidence and considerations about the sufficiency of evidence (so-called evidentialism). However, the threshold for what constitutes sufficient evidence for a doxastic obligation to obtain is determined partly by pragmatic considerations—our desires, expressed via our values, political views, personal ambitions, fears, and so on (known as impurism, or pragmatic encroachment). Oliveira's ethics of belief grounds his work in social and political philosophy, which centers on how our available evidence and political aims converge to determine what social and political concepts we ought to adopt in our collective imagination and public discourse. Oliveira is especially interested in engineering concepts about racial and gender identity, with the aim of rectifying epistemic injustice by providing improved concepts and theoretical tools for ongoing discussions on race and gender in the socio-political sphere.

Erica Preston-Roedder is a Resident Associate Professor at Occidental College. Her current research—which arises from her own experience within a multiracial family—examines philosophical issues raised by American multiraciality, including epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical questions.

In her emerging work, Professor Preston-Roedder explores several dimensions of multiraciality. In one project, she uses notions of philosophical vagueness to explain why some multiracial people find it so hard to answer the question, "What am I?" If racial terms are vague, she argues, then we should expect language to include truth-gaps: in such cases, there is no 'right' answer as to whether a multiracial person is Black, White, Asian, etc. Because of this, a multiracial person typically has epistemic freedom in how to define herself.

In a second project, Professor Preston-Roedder examines the history of early Black-White mixed-race families in the United States. Who were the first Americans to consensually cross the color line, and what were their motivations? How might people today draw meaning from this early history? This project combines historical scholarship with philosophical questions about history as a form of meaning-making.

Professor Preston-Roedder received her undergraduate degree from Stanford and her PhD from New York University. She also holds a Master of Science in public health, and she spent six years working in the non-profit sector as a public health analyst. At Occidental College, she primarily teaches courses in applied ethics (bioethics, public health ethics, ethical debate) as well as courses on gender and race. In her spare time, she is a combination of chauffeur and paparazzi for her two children.

Casey Rentmeester, Ph.D., is Professor of Philosophy and the Associate Dean of Academic Success at Bellin College in Green Bay, WI, USA. In his role as

professor, he is co-editor of *Heidegger and Music* and author of *Heidegger and the Environment*, as well as numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters spanning various topics, including social and political philosophy, environmental philosophy, medical ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy of popular culture, typically from the lens of the Continental philosophical tradition. In his associate dean role, he launched a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion repository of resources that is accessible college-wide so faculty, students, and staff have resources to use language that shows respect to all persons, regardless of their backgrounds. He has also hosted workshops for health professionals on the importance of aligning one's practice with social justice, empathy, tolerance and respect. He lives with his wife and three children in De Pere, WI.

Eddy M. Souffrant is a former University Faculty Council President. Dr. Souffrant's research is in the area of applied ethics with a particular focus on global/international economic and political equity across the African Diaspora. He is a highly respected scholar in his field with three sole-authored monographs, two edited collections, and multiple journal articles and chapters.

He is also a tenured faculty member of the Departments of Philosophy and Africana Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who teaches and writes in the areas of Ethics and Applied Ethics, Social and Political Philosophy, Africana, and Caribbean Philosophy. His work reflects his interest in the areas of Ethics and International Affairs, African American, Francophone and Caribbean Philosophy, Liberalism, and the limits of Liberal Democracy. His recent focus includes Global Development Ethics, Collective responsibility, and Conceptions of Social and Political Identities. His current research projects explore *Créolization*, Francophone Philosophy, Africana Philosophy and the Challenges of Inclusion and will result in a manuscript that explores the intersection of Africana Philosophy, Immigration, and the impacts of Colonial Legacy on the latter's progenies.

He is the Chair of the Africana Studies Department, where he will aim to highlight student success and promote the visibility and inclusion of the voices of the marginalized in the discipline and practice of Philosophy. When not working on these issues, he enjoys music, a museum/gallery walk and time with family and friends and moments seasoned with good cheers.

Violet Victoria is the former Associate Director for the Center for Ethics in Society at Saint Anselm College, where she also taught philosophy. She completed her dissertation at the University of Oklahoma, where she also taught Business Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues.

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