Title: On a Prevailing Misinterpretation of Biko’s Black Consciousness and How Dewey Helps Us Correct It

Abstract: In the forty-plus years since his brutal murder by apartheid South African security forces, the legacy of Bantu Steven Biko continues to be contested. Biko is well known for his antiapartheid activism, particularly as a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. However, more recent scholarship has begun taking seriously Biko’s legacy as worthy of philosophical attention. In an effort to contribute to this body of scholarship, the present paper argues there are valuable lines of affinity (rather than influence) between Biko’s thought and John Dewey’s. Specifically, Biko’s psychology is grounded in something bearing close family resemblances to Dewey’s pragmatic understanding of the self as thickly contextual and profoundly embedded within, and co-constituting its environment in ongoing processes of transactional exchange. Furthermore, Biko’s ethics, much like Dewey’s, appear to flow from this view of the self. Accordingly, both the easy psychology prevalent among Biko’s commentators, which reduces Black Consciousness to psychological bootstrapping, and the sequential teleology of liberation moving from subjective to objective freedom that it underpins must be abandoned in favor of a more complex and contingent picture in which authentic subjective liberation of the self unfolds in step with commensurate objective liberation of environing conditions in an ongoing transactional interplay between individuals and communities and their lived existential contexts.

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In the forty-plus years since his brutal murder by the apartheid South African security forces, the legacy of Bantu Steven Biko continues to be contested. Biko is well known for his anti-apartheid activism, particularly as a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). However, more recent scholarship has begun taking seriously Biko’s legacy as worthy of philosophical attention.

Quite naturally, treatments of Biko as a philosopher lean heavily on analyses of Fanon’s obvious influence. However, as Xolela Mangcu contends early in his biography of Biko, “It is not enough to reduce Biko’s thinking, as many scholars have done, to the influence of Frantz Fanon.” For his part, Mangcu makes the case that Biko’s thought stands within the intellectual tradition of his Xhosa ancestors. Alternately, Daniel Magaziner has usefully shown the heretofore downplayed significance of Christianity and para-church organizations such as University Christian Movement (UCM) in the development of the Black Consciousness Movement including its impact on Biko’s thinking. Meanwhile, Mabogo P. More, referring to Biko as an “Africana Existentialist philosopher,” has argued compellingly that Biko is deeply indebted to existentialism, particularly its Sartrean strain.

Even when Biko’s philosophy is not reduced to the influence of Fanon, it nevertheless tends to be treated reductively, handled as a predominantly psychological doctrine—and a rather unsophisticated one at that. The characteristic features of this interpretive orientation are, first, a reduction of Black Consciousness to psychological bootstrapping, that is, Black Consciousness is simply the call for recovery of one’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion through force of will, and, second, an uncritical assumption that achieving psychological liberation thus will naturally generate robust political and material liberation. We might refer to this prevailing interpretation as the En Vogue View, not simply for the fact of its widespread acceptance, but also since it effectively embodies the slogan of that group’s 90’s hit; according to the En Vogue View, Biko’s Black Consciousness simply says: free your mind and the rest will follow. As motivational slogans go, one could certainly do worse; but as characterizations of Biko’s thought go, one can do far better.

5 Other notable influences on Biko’s thought include Senghor and Cesaire, key figures of the Negritude movement; African anti-colonial activists and revolutionaries such as Nyere, Nkruma, and Kaunda; the radical Black Power movement in America, Carmichael in particular; James Cone and Black theology; and Paolo Freire. Moreover Biko’s frequent reference to principles of dialectical materialism demonstrate the clear influence of Marxist thought.
So thoroughly has this view insinuated itself in the common understanding of Biko that even careful and sympathetic commentators like More, who is rightly keen not simply to present Biko as a philosopher, but also to show the depth and nuance at work in Biko’s thought, occasionally slips into this way of characterizing him. For example, More maintains Biko “focuses on subjective freedom as a prerequisite of objective freedom,” because Biko believed that “without a change from within, the changes without are superficial.” Saths Cooper, a member of BCM and one of the so-called “SASO nine”—student leaders arrested and incarcerated for their antiapartheid activism—echoes More: “Of course we are fighting for physical liberation,” Cooper insists, “but what physical liberation is it where you are psychologically unprepared to handle that liberation?” Biko’s thinking was far more nuanced, complex, and far-ranging, not to mention evolving, than the En Vogue View suggests, and, as I have implied, as More himself convincingly details. Kimberly Ann Harris is one of the few commentators to recognize the difficulty of this teleological reading of Biko, in which subjective liberation is primary and triggers objective liberation more or less automatically, correctly noting, “Sometimes Biko discusses these stages in a style that suggests that they occur simultaneously.” I take this as evidence that, rather than working with a fully formed and consistently articulated system, Biko was struggling to work out a suitable conceptual

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6 More, 110; 109.
8 Biko was a young man—merely thirty years old—at the time of his murder at the hands of the apartheid state. Perhaps the fact that his life was cut short so suddenly accounts for why commentators treat his thought either as fixed and final, or else co-opt it for their own purposes. This is unfortunate. For, on the one hand, the records we have hardly represent what could be called Biko’s “mature” thought. And on the other hand, as Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo forcefully contend, an entire cottage industry exists in which Biko is made to speak for commentators’ own pet politics. “Whether nationalist or socialist, the rhetorical trick is often the same, and apprehending Biko’s legacy becomes a simple matter of following the paths of ‘Biko’s development’ through the respective nationalist or socialist writer’s own political history. ‘If he had lived, this is what Biko would have been,’ they tell us. Their Biko, reduced to a hypothetical mutation in the present and only able to choose, had he lived, between one or other of the embattled factions of the left, has nothing left to say. Nothing, that is, apart from what the respective nationalist’s or socialist’s party is already saying. For these theorists of the ‘what if Biko,’ there is always something insufficient about the Biko of I Write What I Like, something lacking that only the respective author’s political trajectory could provide. In a swift political gesture, Biko is assigned ‘his’ place in space and time” (in Biko Lives!, p. 235). I aim to avoid both of these mistakes, for it is clear to me that Biko’s thought was still in the process of developing at the time of his murder, hence there is no final word to be given on it. Indeed, one feature of my argument below will be that Biko was in the process of trying to work out a conceptual framework and vocabulary adequate to the philosophical view of selfhood and the self’s relation to its contextual situation that complimented his formal pronouncements about Black Consciousness. And, similarly, while I argue that attending to certain affinities with Dewey’s thought helps us recognize this active feature in Biko’s thinking that has been consistently overlooked, I am not thereby making an argument that Biko was a Deweyan or a pragmatist; there is no evidence I know of to support such a claim. Biko was Biko.
framework and vocabulary for his views. I find in Biko a systematic thinker in the thick of working through the implications of his ideas.

In an effort to contribute to the growing body of *philosophical* scholarship on Biko, the present paper stakes out a distinct, yet related position: it argues for reading valuable lines of affinity (rather than influence) between Biko’s thought and John Dewey’s. Specifically, the contention is that Biko’s psychology is grounded in something bearing close family resemblances to Dewey’s pragmatic understanding of the self as thickly contextual and profoundly embedded within, and co-constituting its environment in ongoing processes of transactional exchange. Furthermore, Biko’s ethics, much like Dewey’s, appear to flow from this view of the self. Accordingly, both the easy psychology of the En Vogue View and the sequential teleology of liberation moving from subjective to objective freedom that it underpins must be abandoned in favor of a more complex and contingent picture in which the subjective liberation of the self unfolds in step with commensurate objective liberation of environing conditions in an ongoing transactional interplay between individuals and communities and their lived existential contexts.

Tracing lines of affinity between Biko and Dewey in this way helps us correct the psychological reductionism of the En Vogue view in multiple ways. First, it helps us see that Biko was thinking beyond simple dualisms. Second, it suggests that Biko’s activism was more than just a reactionary political response to conditions under apartheid, it was deeply informed by his philosophical commitments. And third, this corrective recovers Biko from the status of staid historical figure, pointing towards his living philosophical relevance for ongoing liberation struggles in contexts as divergent as Africa, Latin America, and indeed, the United States.

Although misguided, the psychological reductionism of the En Vogue View is not without support in Biko’s work. For example, in an oft-cited passage from his essay, “We Blacks,” Biko claims,

All in all the black man has become a shell of himself, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity . . . The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity . . .

Taken in isolation and at face value, this seems to support the En Vogue View. Biko here appears to suggest that psychological liberation is a prerequisite for shedding the yoke of oppression.

Similarly, in “Black Consciousness and The Quest for a True Humanity,” in which Biko famously asserts “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed,” he describes Black Consciousness as “an attitude of mind and a way of life.” As the following examples of the En Vogue View demonstrate, the first half of this expression and not the second is what has captured commentators’ attention. In a 2017 article commemorating

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11 Biko, 91; 92.
the 40th anniversary of Biko’s death, Takwudza Chiwanga argued “Biko’s approach to activism focused on psychological empowerment, and both he and the BCM saw their main purpose as combating the feeling of inferiority that most black South Africans experienced.”

In a recent piece published by The Conversation and CNN, Matthew Graham contends, “At its heart, Black Consciousness demanded pride, self-assertion, and self-confidence. Biko’s idea was that this would in turn stimulate a ‘revolution of the mind’, allowing oppressed peoples to overcome the racial inferiority and fear propagated by white racism.”

Novelist, poet, and activist, Alice Walker has offered that “This is why one reveres Steve Biko. Because, in short, he fully understood that the foundation of any true liberation . . . is self-love.” According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Black Consciousness sought to awaken in us the sense of our infinite value and worth.”

And in his 2006 Steve Biko Memorial Lecture Tutu concludes with the assertion that “The best memorial to Steve Biko would be a South Africa where everyone respects themselves, has a positive self image filled with a proper self esteem and holds others in high regard.” This is an especially perplexing claim given that, even today, in many ways South Africa remains an apartheid state, albeit informally; one would think that dismantling those structures would be a more fitting memorial to Biko than Tutu’s proposed feel-goodism.

Biko’s friend and editor of the Daily Dispatch, Donald Woods, has written, “The idea behind Black Consciousness was to break away almost entirely from past black attitudes to the liberation struggle and to set a new style of self-reliance and dignity for blacks as a psychological attitude leading to new initiatives.”

In the Forward to the collection of Biko’s writings entitled, I Write What I Like, philosopher Lewis R. Gordon, contends “Black Consciousness calls for black realization of the humanity of black folk. It is a transcendence of self-hatred.” And according to sociologist Ali Abdi, “Primarily, BC was a response to the crisis of identity and psychological alienation that were plaguing the lives of South African Black youth.”

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One of the most crystalline expressions of the En Vogue View comes from Mosibudi Mangena, a fellow member with Biko in the 1970’s of both of the South African Student Organization (SASO), and the BCM. Writing on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of Biko’s death, Mangena notes that SASO’s expressed goal was to “create a free and open society where the colour, race and origin of an individual would not be a point of reference.” Achieving this goal would require black South Africans to reclaim their dignity and humanity, eroded over centuries of anti-black racist oppression leaving them with a profound inferiority complex. To that end, according to Mangena, “We embarked on a massive conscientisation campaign to liberate blacks from psychological oppression as one of the important pre-conditions for physical liberation.” This echoes More’s suggestion that Biko understood subjective freedom to be a prerequisite for objective freedom.

This position is problematic on its face, it’s popularity notwithstanding. However, for the purposes of this paper, what concerns us is not that commentators have focused on the psychological dimension—after all, Biko did in fact stress it—but, rather, that this is as deep as mainstream commentary tends to go. The problem is the consistent failure to question how one achieves this psychological liberation in the context of the relentless, pervasive, and brutal oppression by the apartheid regime, penetrating every facet of black South African life. How is Mangena, Mosibudi (2007) Thirty years on and not much has changed, in We Write What We Like, ed. Chris Van Wyk. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. 11-18.

It is worth noting that Mangena goes on to note that while political freedom exists in post-apartheid South Africa, “it seems that yesterday and today are one, if today is not worse, in as far as psychological liberation and group self-esteem are concerned.” This testimony presents difficulties for the En Vogue View. In the first place, it appears to represent counterfactual evidence against the idea that psychological liberation was in fact a necessary precondition for other forms of liberation. Beyond that, however, it speaks to the value of the alternate view to be presented in more detail below, that authentic psychological liberation cannot be reduced to individuals’ internal states, but requires commensurate transformations in environing existential conditions, across a range of concerns, including, but not limited to political freedoms.

20 To begin with, it is confronted by “tipping point problems” at both the subjective and objective levels. At the subjective level the problem is: how liberated must one be psychologically in order for the precondition for physical liberation to have been met? What if, for instance, one achieves a steady self-esteem and self-confidence, but lacks self-assertion? At the objective level, the question is whether all black South Africans must achieve psychological liberation before physical liberation becomes possible, and if not, what the tipping point is at which that possibility emerges. In both cases there are questions about how regressions are to be understood.

Additionally, this view fails to explain why psychological-subjective liberation is a prerequisite for physical-objective liberation, except to offer, as More did, the undefended platitude that physical liberation without psychological liberation remains “superficial.” Might not one equally well offer the reverse suggestion, that apart from physical liberation, psychological liberation remains superficial? Cannot psychological liberation follow physical liberation?

Moreover, this view problematizes the rationale for the struggle to secure physical-objective liberation; it fails to explain the moral motivation it aims at. For, if Black Consciousness reduces to psychological liberation in the form of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion, in short, the recovery of pride and dignity, and if these can be achieved independent of (since prior to) physical liberation, what is the motivation for maintaining the difficult struggle toward the institutional, social, and ideal transformations required for physical liberation, particularly if, as Biko wrote and commentators are fond of quoting, “If one is free at heart, no man made chains can bind one to servitude” (Biko, 92).
one to convince oneself of one’s self-worth when at every point of contact with one’s environing contextual situation, the unmistakable signal of your valuelessness is brought home to you? Unlike most of his commentators, who seldom if ever consider this problem, Biko seems aware of the challenge insofar as he moves quickly past the slogans on which commentators fixate, attempting to analyze the instrumentalities by which psychological liberation is achieved. Carefully following his thinking in this connection suggests that Biko did not see psychological liberation as separate from or essentially prior to physical, material, or political liberation. Instead, subjective and objective liberation are entwined such that authentic psychological liberation is gained gradually as gains are made in physical, material, and political liberation. Whereas commentators focus overwhelmingly on the psychological terms behind the hyphen of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion, Biko seems to have grasped the more pressing philosophical need to understand the self at the front end of the hyphen in relation to its existential milieu.

Specifically citing Dewey by way of comparison, Mabogo More notes that Biko’s philosophy was not academic, by which he means “It does not indulge in exegeses or training students to become experts in philosophical discourse, but has as its fundamental project the radical and concrete transformation of the being of the individual, the bringing out of a certain way of being human.” Instead, Biko’s philosophy was, like Dewey’s, a way of life. “As a way of life, philosophy thus means that philosophical reflection does not occur outside the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts but is something that is fundamentally situated.” Elsewhere, More aptly observes that “As a philosopher, Biko’s concern was not with theoretical abstractions, but with the concrete and existential struggles which shape human—especially black—existence.” Biko described his philosophical disposition as “a basic attitude formed primarily from experience, from an analysis of the situation as one sees it.”

Indeed, the affinity between Biko and Dewey is quite striking at times. Consider the following passages. In “The Church as Seen by a Young Layman,” Biko points out that in a country where father and son, mother and daughter alike develop daily into neurotics through sheer inability to relate the present to the future because of a completely engulfing sense of destitution . . . [s]tern-faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of guilt on black people in townships for their thieving, house-breaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery, etc. No-one ever attempts to relate all these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of schooling and migratory

22 Woods notes that Biko “wasn’t a pamphleteer, and scorned sloganeering” (Woods, 146).
23 More, 74.
labor. No one wants to completely condone abhorrent behavior, but it frequently is
necessary for us to analyze situations a little bit deeper than the surface suggests.\footnote{Biko, 56-57.}

There is a strong resonance here with Dewey’s \textit{Human Nature and Conduct}, where he offers the
following observation:

Courses of action which put the blame exclusively on a person as if his evil were the sole
cause of wrong-doing and those which condone offense on account of the share of social
conditions in producing bad disposition, are equally ways of making an unreal
separation of man from his surroundings, mind from the world. Causes for an act
always exist, but causes are not excuses . . . Our entire tradition regarding punitive
justice tends to prevent recognition of social partnership in producing crime; it falls in
with a belief in metaphysical free will. By killing an evil-doer or shutting him up behind
stone walls, we are enabled to forget both him and our part in creating him . . . No
amount of guilt on the part of the evil-doer absolves us from responsibility for the
consequences upon him and others of our way of treating him, or from our continuing
responsibility for the conditions under which persons develop perverse habits.\footnote{Ibid. 16.}

These passages reveal a shared refusal to reduce personal action to individual internal states,
whether of reason, will, or character, and a recognition that, as Dewey puts it, society “is always
accessory before and after the fact” of individual action.\footnote{Biko, 115-116.}

During the 1976 SASO/BPC trial, in which Biko was charged with “alleged subversion
by intent,” prosecutors brought as evidence against him the wording of the tribute to Nthuli
Shezi, then the BPC vice president, issued by the BPC in response to his assassination by a white
South African railway worker who pushed Shezi in front of an oncoming train. Biko defended
the language, saying, “condemnation of that man, that kind of mentality, that is what is being
condemned here . . . the kind of society which gives that kind of mentality to a man to make
him feel that he can freely push someone onto the rails, you must condemn the entire society
because that man is not alone in developing this feeling against blacks. He is rooted in a society,
a society which has got a particular history and a particular relationship with blacks, so he feels
somehow that it is right when he does this.”\footnote{Biko, 56-57. This is especially illuminating, as it demonstrates
the systematic nature of Biko’s thinking on this point. In both cases, his analysis first of the vices
of township life and then the racist murder of Shezi holds individuals accountable for their
actions, while stressing that individuals’ actions are also at the same time functions of the
environing conditions in which the individuals are embedded. Neither case is strictly reducible
to the inner will, reason, or character of the self, nor to the environing forces of their social
surround, but, rather, must be understood in terms of the complex interaction between the two.

In describing Biko’s analysis, I stress the word \textit{functions}, for while Biko does not
explicitly deploy the category of habit as the cooperative interaction between individual
capacities and environing conditions as Dewey does, these examples suggest that something
resembling this category was nevertheless implicit and operative in his thinking. Dewey
compares habits to biological functions in which individual’s actions of breathing, eating,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{Biko} Biko, 56-57.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid. 16.
\bibitem{Biko} Biko, 115-116.
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walking, and so on, require not only bodily capabilities, but cooperative environing support. “Breathing is as much an affair of the air as truly of the lungs; digesting an affair of food as truly as of tissues of the stomach. Seeing involves light just as certainly as it does the eye and optic nerve. Walking implicates the ground as well as the legs; speech demands physical air and human companionship and audience as well as vocal organs.”

In this way, bodily functions are as much activities of the environment through the individual organism as they are activities of the individual organism in and through the environment. As Biko’s analysis makes clear, both the township murders driven by destitution and hopelessness, and Shezi’s murder driven by anti-black racism, are functions of the pervasive apartheid environment in and through which the individual actors expressed their agency.

Thus, the view of selfhood operative in Biko’s thinking is concrete, contingent, and contextual; in short, it is pragmatic. The apparent ease with which the En Vogue View assumes that self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion are attainable, despite the overwhelmingly pervasive nature of apartheid oppression is more consistent with an Enlightenment view of selfhood than with the pragmatic view of selfhood operative in Biko’s thinking and explicit in Dewey’s. According to the Enlightenment view, the individual is self-contained, self-constituted, indeed, is essentially itself independent of “external” influences, including interpersonal and group relationships, socio-historical factors, economic pressures, geography, and other environing existential conditions. By contrast, Biko’s affinity with the pragmatic view of the self is in part a function of his inherited African worldview, and in part a function of the observable effects of apartheid oppression at both individual and group levels.

The African view of selfhood Biko inherited drives away from the rabid individualism of the Enlightenment model of the self and towards a model of the self as social. In “Some African Cultural Concepts,” Biko explains the difference as he understands it. Whereas the individualism of the Enlightenment model is impersonal and competitive, African notions of selfhood are communal in nature; the individual is grounded in “a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.” As a result, “all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark” of white European Enlightenment views. And in “We Blacks,” Biko suggests “the interrelationship between man and man in the black world as opposed to the highly impersonal world in which Whitey lives,” is a function of the difference in the “sense of belonging to the community” characteristic of African understandings of selfhood.

Biko provides further evidence of his pragmatic view of selfhood, noting not just the social (i.e., interpersonal) nature of selves, but stressing as well the significance of environing conditions, social (i.e., institutional), material, and ideal. In a 1972 interview with Gail Gerhart, commenting on the tendency among South African liberals toward what he called a “comfortable politics” that moves “at a pace that doesn’t rock the boat,” Biko observes that “people are shaped by the system even in their consideration of approaches against the system.”

One effect of this, he notes, is that people often censure themselves more robustly than the state would. In other words, self-confidence and self-assertion are not purely internal

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30 Dewey, 15.
31 Biko, 42.
32 Ibid. 30.
33 Gerhart, p. 29.
capacities insulated from contingencies of one’s environment, but, rather, are responses both to, and from within the context of those environing contingencies. “We live mentally as physically only in and because of our environment,” Dewey observes. Later in the interview, Biko critiques the view held by South African communists and some liberals at the time that apartheid could be defeated solely through economic revolution. Biko stresses, it is not only capitalism that is involved; it is also the whole gamut of white value systems which has been adopted as standard by South Africa, both whites and blacks. And that will need attention, even in a post-revolutionary society. Values relating to all the fields—education, religion, culture, and so on. So your problems are not solved completely when you alter the economic pattern to a socialist pattern. You still don’t become what you ought to be.

The clear implication from the context of the interview is that the project of psychological liberation, “becoming what you ought to be,” requires transformations across these various dimensions of the existential environment in which the self interacts. It is simply not enough, in Biko’s view, to focus solely on psychological states. Subjective liberation requires a transvaluation of values as well as a transformation of the economic, educational, religious, and cultural institutions and structures transmitting and empowering these values.

One important upshot of this line of thinking is that selves are not acontextual entities. Magaziner puts it well when he claims that for Biko “Black selfhood was contingent, topical and limited.” There are clear lines of affinity between Biko’s thinking here, and the pragmatic view that understands the self as emerging, developing, and existing in transactional exchanges with environing existential conditions—social, material, and ideal. Moreover, Biko’s ethics, in which his political activism was grounded, flow from his pragmatic understanding of selfhood.

Perhaps one explanation for why the En Vogue View reduces Black Consciousness to a one-dimensional psychological endeavor is that interpreters have bought into an unexamined presupposition we might fruitfully refer to as the Two Worlds View. I borrow this language primarily from Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*, although he deploys this framing device in other notable works, including *Ethics*, *The Quest for Certainty*, and *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, as well as more obscure writings, such as a 1944 address to the University of Miami Winter Institute of Arts and Sciences, pointedly entitled, “Between Two Worlds.”

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34 Dewey, 224.
35 Gerhart, 34.
Dewey suggests the dominant Western mode of moral theory demonstrates a persistent habit of treating human nature as separate from the rest of nature, and the moral universe as separate from the natural universe. Consequently, “men come to live in two worlds, one the actual, the other the ideal.” This view has generated two typical responses. The first and far more prevalent response, focuses on individuals’ internal capacities and resources as the sole terrain of moral concern, while the other focuses on external factors such as institutional structures. For the former group, call them the “internalists,” moral endeavor plays out exclusively on the plane of metaphysical free will, or virtuous character, or a redeemed soul, etc., with the assumption that moral progress on this level leads inevitably to a morally satisfactory state of affairs at the “external” institutional and material level. This is because internalists see institutions as extensions of moral agents. The latter group, call them “externalists,” are less sanguine about the efficacy of individual human agency. Consequently, externalists think that hearts and minds will not be changed unless institutions are first transformed. Despite appearing antithetical, these responses have in common the basic premise that the Two Worlds View is correct.

Dewey rejects the Two Worlds View, arguing instead that human nature is continuous with the rest of nature, and that the moral universe is continuous with the natural universe. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey urges “doing away once for all with the traditional distinction between moral goods, like the virtues, and natural goods, like health, economic security, art, science, and the like.” And in *The Quest for Certainty*, he points out that “moralists usually draw a sharp line between the field of the natural sciences and the conduct that is regarded as moral,” lamenting “[t]he narrow scope which moralists often give to morals, their isolation of some conduct as virtuous and vicious from other large ranges of conduct, those having to do with health and vigor, business, education, with all the affairs in which desires and affections are implicated.” Accordingly, Dewey proposes an alternate view that rejects this misguided dualism, and instead attends to the interactions between, on the one side, individual capacities and resources, and on the other, social institutions and other environing conditions. Call this the interactionist (or transactionalist) view.

This is a helpful frame for understanding Biko’s thought, which, I have been arguing, demonstrates an affinity with the pragmatic transactional view of the self, and thus helps us see why the En Vogue View is mistaken. As the preceding discussion makes clear, the En Vogue View interprets Biko along internalist lines, according to which Black Consciousness boils down to a program of individual psychological boot-strapping that allegedly will trigger widespread material liberation—though how this will happen is never explored, much less explained. Writing in *The African Communist* barely two years after Biko’s murder, in a broadside aimed at painting Black Consciousness as a liberal movement, despite Biko’s explicit critique of liberalism, Toussaint alleges of Biko that “For him too the starting point of social change and social institutions is not to be sought in the condition of society itself, but in its ideas. . . the idea is the starting point of everything—the only idea must be the Black Consciousness idea. Social change follows the idea.” Toussaint adds that Biko’s philosophy “is, in almost every detail, an

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exposition of liberalism—but from a new angle for South Africa—the angle of a black liberal. Throughout, consciousness, thinking, ideas are what is important, the material basis of society secondary, almost unimportant.”

Toussaint’s interpretation exhibits the same popular division between the individual and the institutional, the personal and the material, albeit from an adversarial angle, and represents as clear an example of the Two Worlds View as Mangena’s interpretation highlighted above. There is a clear distinction made between the internal realm of consciousness, thinking, and ideas, and the external realm of political, economic, social, and material conditions. Moreover, following the typical pattern Dewey cites, both Toussaint and Mangena privilege the internal dimension over the external. Treating individual psychological transformation as categorically distinct from, and as either a prerequisite for institutional, material, and social transformation, or else as the lone site of importance, implies that individuals’ psychological states are discontinuous with and more important than the lived, existential conditions of the self.

By grounding his view in a pragmatic understanding of the self as a transactional organism Biko avoids limiting Black Consciousness along internalist lines as primarily psychological liberation, either by reducing liberation to its subjective dimension, or by treating it as a necessary prerequisite for objective liberation. Because the self in need of recovering esteem, confidence, and assertion is thickly contextual, both constituting and constituted-by its material, social, and ideal environment, psychological liberation can only occur in step with commensurate transformations in existential conditions warranting a transformation in one’s psychological disposition. To borrow Dewey’s language, “no amount of preaching good will or the golden rule or cultivation of sentiments of love and equity will accomplish the results. There must be change in objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment not merely on the hearts of men.”

The ongoing active transformation of existing material, social, and ideal conditions functions as powerful means of engendering, grounding, and supporting the ongoing project of authentic psychological liberation since these are the conditions in which the self emerges, develops, and is either sustained or stunted. As the oppressed are able gradually, in a variety of ways, through a variety of different means, to transform their oppressive conditions, they thereby strengthen the basis for their growing self-

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42 Toussaint. (1979) “‘Fallen Among Liberals’ An Ideology of Black Consciousness Examined” The African Communist No 78, 3rd Quarter 1979. London: Inkululeko Publications, p. 24. This sweeping allegation has no basis in fact; indeed, it is a slur. As is evident below, Biko was very concerned with material conditions, and not merely intellectually, but practically, supporting and in some cases spearheading community projects like the establishment of the Zanempilo Health Center, revitalizing the Ginsburg crèche, promoting the Njwaxa home industries, setting up the Ginsburg Education Fund, and frequently giving his own money to send young people to university. Neville Alexander has noted that the South African Communist Party actively worked to “create an atmosphere of suspicion and rivalry” around the BCM, and Mangcu adds that “It is hard to know when the denigration of Steve Biko’s name started within the ANC . . . One can only conclude . . . that it came mostly from the communists who were threatened by the influx of the post-1976 nationalistic leadership that was swelling the ranks of the organization in exile” (Mangcu, 289). One wonders, in light of this, whether Toussaint’s analysis is an attempt to further this agenda in the wake of Biko’s death. (See Alexander, Neville (2008) “An Illuminating Moment: Background to the Azanian Manifesto” in Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko, eds. Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, & Nigel C. Gibson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 157-170.)

esteem, self-confidence, and self-assertion; and as one is thus progressively liberated subjectively, one is increasingly more able to struggle for still greater objective liberation.

Putting this hypothesis to work, we find it usefully informs our understanding of Biko’s refusal to pursue paths toward liberation that depended on the good graces, influence, and power of even well meaning liberal white South Africans. This commitment was not only evident in his scathing critique of white liberals, who he saw as insisting that the problems facing black South Africans required white solutions, thus demonstrating an “intellectual arrogance . . . that makes them believe that white leadership is a sine qua non in this country and that whites are the divinely appointed pace-setters in progress.”44 It was also evident in his leadership in convincing black university students to break away from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) to form their own student group, SASO, in 1970. Although liberal and in principle nonracial, NUSAS was nevertheless dominated by white leadership, a fact which translated materially in terms of the casual pace at which it worked toward liberation and the limited risks it was willing to take along the way.

On one side, the problem was that white liberals “vacillate between the two worlds, verbalising all the complaints of the blacks beautifully while skillfully extracting what suits them from the exclusive pool of white privileges.”45 On the other side, the problem with relying on white liberals to deliver black liberation has to do with the damaging effects of being given liberation by another, or more broadly, it is the problem of what Dewey diagnoses in Ethics as a certain kind of misguided charity that is “used as a means for administering a sop to one’s social conscience while at the same time it buys off the resentment which might otherwise grow up in those who suffer from social injustice.”46 According to Biko, “no group, however benevolent, can ever hand power to the vanquished on a plate.”47 Two pressing, large scale problems would remain unresolved in such an event. First, the deep seated feeling of inferiority Biko believed to be prevalent among black South Africans would go unaddressed. Second, it would not eliminate the specter of fear Biko diagnosed as a controlling force in black South African life.48 Indeed, receiving liberation from the white power structure rather than achieving liberation through one’s own efforts would likely exacerbate both of these problems, reinforcing an inferiority complex and further entrenching fear of white minority power, which was able to do what black majority power was not. “[D]eliberate benevolence,” Dewey observes, can be “used as a means of keeping others dependent and managing their affairs for them.”49

44 Biko, 24. Biko expands on this critique in “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity”: “Thus, even those whites who see much wrong with the system make it their business to control the response of the blacks to the provocation. No one is suggesting that it is not the business of liberal whites to oppose what is wrong. However, it appears to us as too much of a coincidence that liberals—few as they are—should not only be determining the modus operandi of those blacks who oppose the system, but also leading it, in spite of their involvement in the system. To us it seems that their role spells out the totality of the white power structure — the fact that though whites are our problem, it is still other whites who want to tell us how to deal with that problem” (Biko 89).
47 Biko, 90.
49 Dewey, LW 7: 301.
Liberation received, ironically, has a enslaving effect. This is why Biko urged blacks to “reject the beggar tactics that are being forced on us by those who wish to appease our cruel masters,” for “[a]s long as we go to Whitey begging cap in hand for our own emancipation, we are giving him further sanction to continue with his racist and oppressive system.”

More explicitly, the problem with the strategy of relying on even sympathetic white liberals is that it is passive; by failing to engage the active agencies of the oppressed it fails to transform oppressed selves in the liberation process. Thus, while it perhaps achieves certain forms of objective liberation, it does so at the expense of stunting subjective liberation. Biko’s focus on the transactional relationship between self and environment precludes reliance on white liberal benevolence as a viable strategy.

Biko repeatedly emphasized Black Consciousness’ aim of “achieving the envisioned self.” Abandoning the En Vogue interpretation built on an understanding of the self as a theoretical abstraction presses the question: What are the concrete existential obstacles to achieving the envisioned self, to “becoming what you ought to be”? Tracing Biko’s response to this question provides further clues that he understood authentic psychological liberation to be inextricable from the simultaneous achievement of commensurate material, social, and ideal liberation, and that he held a something like a pragmatic transactional view of the self. It is telling that Biko leaves his formulation vague and open-ended. For example, in “We Blacks,” Biko advocates a black theology reading of the Bible on the grounds that such a reading alone is able to sustain black South Africans on the “long journey towards realisation of the self.” This implies an ongoing project of self-creation and -consolidation rather than a simple shift in self-perspective. But while Biko leaves the category of the self open-ended, he does not understand it to be vacant, a tabula rasa.

In his essay, “The Definition of Black Consciousness,” Biko notes that the goal of Black Consciousness is “to attain the envisioned self which is a free self.” There may be a temptation to insert an abstract Western notion of the self here, however Biko forecloses this maneuver. We see this clearly in “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” where Biko expands on what he means by the envisioned, free self. “The philosophy of Black Consciousness,” he writes, “expresses group pride and the determination of the black to rise and attain the envisioned self. Freedom is the ability to define oneself with one’s possibilities held back not by the power of other people over one, but only by one’s relationship to God and to natural surroundings. On his own, therefore, the black man wishes to explore his surroundings and test his possibilities—in other words, to make his freedom real by whatever means he deems fit.” The envisioned self is no avatar; it is indeterminate, a function of one’s exploratory transactions with one’s surroundings. It is an ever unfolding experiment. In other words, the envisioned self is an open horizon envisioned and created by each individual according as her

50 Biko, 90-19.
51 Ibid, 31.
52 Ibid. 49.
53 Ibid. 92; emphasis added.
experiments in making her freedom real permit; it is not a fixed entity given prior to experience. While the envisioned self is clearly bound by environing conditions, it’s “surroundings,” nevertheless it is not determined fully by them. This is the self which Biko’s Black Consciousness aims to achieve.

Thus, although Biko does not assume any specific concrete picture of the envisioned self, nevertheless, his general understanding of the self is not without form, but is, rather, existentially contextual, one in which the self’s contour and content emerge and develop in transaction with environing existential conditions. When Biko is read in context, it is clear that he links authentic psychological liberation with material, social, and ideal liberation, and in so doing, his broader call for liberation represents in concrete terms Dewey’s transactionalist model. To more clearly get at his transactional notion of selfhood it is worth registering the broad range of considerations Biko thematizes among the environing existential conditions—institutional, material, social, and ideal—impeding the achievement of the envisioned self in the context of apartheid South Africa.

At the institutional level, Biko cites the intentionally inferior education offered to black South Africans designed to equip them for nothing higher than jobs in service industries, while also painting a picture of white Afrikaner society as advanced, enlightened, and superior, and indigenous African society as backward, barbaric, and inferior, and noting as well the fact that only in these impoverished communities are students required to purchase their own text books. He points to job reservation policies limiting skilled training and thereby artificially capping at low levels professional possibilities for blacks. He cites influx control and pass laws restricting freedom of movement, and, more broadly, the extensive and complex system of laws constructed explicitly for the purpose of controlling the black majority population. He criticizes Bantustan policies, not only in their obvious political impacts by generating inter-tribal tension, but also the effect of the Bantustans’ geography both psychologically and economically.

At the material level, Biko cites the crippling effects of rampant poverty and the need to develop black businesses and banks. In multiple places Biko addresses the impact on selves and self-development of basic infrastructure, including lack of public transportation between the townships and urban centers where jobs are located, which requires frequent foot travel on poorly maintained roads in and from the townships, leading in turn to rapid deterioration of basic necessities like shoes. He notes the inefficiency of the trains as well as the frequent violence occurring on them—a threat that persists to this day; and he also notes the significance the poor transportation infrastructure has for access to medical care. Biko points out the fact that the townships lack running water and sewage systems, as well as power, and this requires

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54 Ibid. 28-29; 94; 102-103.
55 Ibid. 97.
56 Ibid. 29; 88.
57 Ibid. 110.
58 Ibid. 75.
59 Ibid. 33ff; 80ff.
60 Ibid. 75; 96; 101.
61 Ibid. 28; 77; 96-97; 101ff.
62 Ibid. 96.
those living in the townships to rely on expensive and dangerous fuel sources, such as paraffin lamps.\textsuperscript{63}

At the social level Biko addresses the powerful effects of anti-black white racism.\textsuperscript{64} He notes the high rates of violence, both within the black community stemming from the hardships of township life, and at the hands of security forces, and the pervasive fear this engenders in the black community.\textsuperscript{65} As we have seen, he repeatedly and scathingly points to the deleterious effect of white liberals’ involvement in the antiapartheid struggle.\textsuperscript{66} He notes the effects of the \textit{swart gevaar} (Afrikaans for “black danger”) propaganda;\textsuperscript{67} of random police brutality\textsuperscript{68} and persistent coordinated campaigns of fear and intimidation\textsuperscript{69} as well as the harmful effects that these and the aforementioned institutional pressures have on family structure and stability, and the consequent effects that has on both educational and economic prospects. And he stresses the importance for achieving the envisioned self of reevaluating, recovering, and reconstructing indigenous South African culture.\textsuperscript{70}

Finally, at the ideal level, Biko discusses the importance for “becoming what one ought to be” of possessing control of educational processes and content.\textsuperscript{71} He notes the significance of critically assessing formal religions and religious ideas.\textsuperscript{72} He points to the need to recover a balanced history—both formal and informal—that does not valorize white settler colonial history and demonize indigenous African history.\textsuperscript{73} We have already seen that he stresses the importance of being guided by values that are claimed for oneself, not forced by white society,\textsuperscript{74} especially the ubuntu value, which also connects with a concern for a recovery of indigenous

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid. On a recent visit to South Africa I had the opportunity to tour Enkanini informal settlement, an illegal township outside Stellenbosch established in 2006 when residents of the overcrowded neighboring Kayamandi township forced their way through a fence along Kayamandi’s border and squatted on the hillside that is now the heart of Enkanini, but is still officially owned by the Stellenbosch municipality. My host’s shack sat adjacent to two rows of shacks running up the hill from his “street,” all of which were made of relatively new corrugated steel and other materials, and brightly painted. These residences stood out starkly against the backdrop of the rest of the neighborhood. I asked my host why these residences, which were nevertheless jammed tightly amidst the older-appearing residences, seemed to be new. He explained that a few months prior a fire that had begun from a curtain blowing into a paraffin lamp had ripped up the hillside through the preexisting structures, leaving a swath of destruction in its wake. More recently, in Kliptown I passed a blown-out large electrical power box beside a commercial building and a pair of heavy wires running from the box behind the building, across the parking lot and train tracks and into Kliptown. Scenes like this, in which township residents pirate energy from the electrical grid are still common.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. 25; 97-98.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. 56-57; 73-79; 109; 111; 115-116.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid. 21ff; 89.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 77.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. 78.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 73ff.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. 40-47; 52; 93; 95-96.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. 28-29; 88; 94; 102.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid. 29-30; 93-94.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. 29; 95.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. 30; 91; 92-93.
ethics. Biko even specifically notes the importance of critically evaluating, and when necessary reconstructing concepts as part of the ongoing effort to achieve the envisioned self.

The overlapping, cumulative, and generational toll of these corrosive existential environing conditions on individuals, families, and extended communities means that an authentic psychological liberation demands more than simply shifting perspective with regard to one’s self-esteem. Deep habits of feeling inferior formed in such an environment are not easy to get free of. Indeed, as Dewey notes, they cannot be changed directly, “that notion is magic,” but he continues, “we can change [such habits] indirectly by modifying conditions.”

Doing so demands the ongoing achievement of the envisioned self, which is the open-ended, free self, capable of making her freedom real by whatever means she deems fit through creative, experimental, exploratory self-testing in and through her existential context. The freedom requisite for achieving the envisioned self, then, is simply not possible apart from a radical transformation of the network of environing existential conditions which currently retard, corrode, and foreclose those possibilities.

Achille Mbembe astutely recognizes this. He notes that in blacks’ effort to rise above their low position in South African society, “The surest road to a dignified existence is self-respect, self-help, independence of mind, creativity and ambition,” importantly adding what Tutu omits, namely that, “The transformation project can easily turn into social quackery if its first goal is not to restore capacities to those who have been deprived of these by unjust laws and racist policies.”

This paper has argued that the prevailing interpretation of Biko’s Black Consciousness, the En Vogue View, mistakenly reduces Black Consciousness to a naive program of psychological uplift. In an effort to correct this view, the paper has argued that there is a pragmatic transactional view of the self at the heart of Biko’s philosophy that points toward a more complex and contingent understanding of authentic psychological liberation; this understanding ties authentic psychological liberation to commensurate radical transformations in existential environing conditions—material, social, and ideal. The following exchange from Biko’s testimony at the SASO Nine trial illustrates the point.

Atwell [prosectuor]: Would you agree with me that SASO and BPC concentrate to a large extent on psychological oppression in their approach?

Biko: Yes, but I think as I said in my evidence-in-chief the whole community development program is in fact directed also at alleviating suffering, which is a

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73 Ibid. 30.
74 Ibid. 92; 94.
75 Dewey MW 14: 19.
form of physical oppression, and by physical liberation we also imply liberation from those actual living conditions which are oppressive.\textsuperscript{79}

By way of conclusion, it is valuable to point briefly to some concrete ways in which Biko’s biography supports the corrected view offered in the preceding pages. Mphutlane wa Bofelo has demonstrated the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement under Biko’s leadership on the flourishing of black poetry in South Africa both during the Black Consciousness era, from roughly the 1960s-1980s, and the resurgence of black poetry after 1994. Although many black poets and actors during Biko’s time were members of the Black Consciousness Movement, Bofelo notes that they “were not directed or mandated by the BC movement” to produce works of a certain nature.\textsuperscript{80} Nevertheless,

The stylistic, aesthetic, and thematic concerns of the Black Consciousness poets were based in the idea of a complete break with the economic base and sociocultural superstructure of settler/colonial capitalism and aimed at recreating political and cultural expression of the South African reality, rooted in historical-material experiences of Black People and defined by the concrete and tangible conditions of the black majority. This meant confronting the white power structure and providing inspiration for black solidarity as an instrument of Black Power, as well as destroying the complex of inferiority and the culture of subservience . . . \textsuperscript{81}

Through their literary works, Black Consciousness poets took up Biko’s call to achieve the envisioned self by taking creative, economic, and political control of their own cultural and intellectual products. These products in turn had the effect of re-centering, motivating, and sustaining the community through the antiapartheid struggle. Bofelo contends the influence of Black Consciousness on black poetry “was the result of general political education and mass conscientization efforts of the BC movement rather than a product of an attempt to recruit writers and artists into the fold of the BC movement.”\textsuperscript{82} But while the BCM did not recruit sympathetic artists or dictate what types of art they should produce, it did actively and concretely support their efforts, for instance by booking venues for performances.\textsuperscript{83}

Similarly, in 1974, while banned to his hometown of Ginsburg, King William’s Town, in the Eastern Cape, Biko was influential, along with Mamphele Ramphele, in establishing Zanempilo Community Health Center in the village of Zinyoka. Establishing the Center, which was a full service hospital, is a prime example of Biko walking the talk, of testing his possibilities as a free self, of avoiding the “beggar tactics” he so reviled. The value of the clinic, however, extended well beyond the obvious value of providing much needed medical services to the community; as the only primary health care center in the region, it drew people from considerable distances. Over and above this, as Mangcu notes in his biography, “People who did not have jobs suddenly found themselves with something to do at the clinic, whether in

\textsuperscript{79} Woods, 187.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. 195-196.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. 198.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. 198.
construction, or . . . as cooks or cleaners." In addition to being a source of meaningful work and gainful employment, the Center became an important community hub. It served “as the place where the nucleus of the movement would converge to discuss important matters,” as well as a guesthouse for visitors who came to see the community project firsthand, or who sought to consult with Biko. “Part of ‘pumping life’ into black South Africans and infusing them with pride and dignity,” notes historian Leslie Hadfield, “was community development,” rightly adding, “[t]his aspect has received little attention in the academic literature on South Africa’s Black Consciousness movement that has largely focused on its political and ideological dynamics.” Working with oral histories, Hadfield has shown that the impact of Zanempilo was extensive, improving Zinyoka physically and economically, and engendering among the local residents a sense of dignity. “The clinic changed the physical and economic health of the community of Zinyoka and the way individuals viewed themselves. This was because the clinic took a holistic view to treating the health problems of the community. The Black Consciousness philosophy and their previous experience with community work led the BCP to make a broader assessment of the health problems in Zinyoka and link the illness of patients to their environment and living situation.”

Because the details are so remarkable, it is worth quoting at length an example Hadfield provides illustrating how this holistic and transactional approach worked in concrete practice.

To address the root causes of the health problems in Zinyoka, the clinic staff researched the situation of the community and initiated economic and training programmes. During its first years of operation, the medical staff at Zanempilo met with the BCP branch executive (under Biko’s direction) each month to discuss the clinic’s progress and service statistics. Nontobeko Moletsane, one of the first head nurses at the Zanempilo clinic, remembered one month when, after she presented statistics showing a high rate of childhood deaths, Biko became very angry. He assigned Moletsane to research the root cause of these deaths in order to prevent them. Moletsane went out into the community and discovered that many husbands had gone to work in mines and had not come back or sent money. The women had lost hope and had become apathetic. They had even ceased gardening in their plots of land. In response to this, the clinic staff embarked on a programme of relief and empowerment, initially providing food and then offering skill-building courses that taught women home budgeting, farming techniques and crafts. They also instigated a grocery bulk-buying scheme and a chicken-raising co-operative. Soon, according to Moletsane, the death rate declined and the clinic stopped dealing with minute nutrition issues.

It would have come as no surprise to Biko that one result of the Center’s establishment was enhanced dignity among local residents; indeed, it was almost certainly part of the plan. The Reverend Mcebisi Xundu, head of the BCP in the Transkei, confirms that this was part of the rationale behind Zanempilo and similar community projects, telling Mangcu in an interview

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84 Mangcu, 221.
85 Ibid.
87 Ibid. 90.
88 Ibid. 91.
that the projects were intended to give communities a sense of ownership which empowered them to resist government interference. Biko himself affirms this as well. “We believe that black people, as they rub shoulders with their particular project, as they benefit from that project, with their perception of it, they begin to ask themselves questions, and we surely believe that they are going to give themselves answers, and they understand . . . this kind of lesson has been a lesson to me: I must have hope.” Importantly, though, the improved sense of dignity felt by residents of Zinyoka was not the result of a merely “internal” shift in self-perception. Rather, this example shows that the “internal” shift occurred in transaction with commensurate “external” changes in existential environing conditions brought about by their efforts in building, running, and maintaining the Center. As such, it stands as clear evidence of the pragmatic transactional view at the heart of Biko’s thinking and activism.

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89 Mangcu, 228.

90 Quoted in Mangcu, 228.