

## The Weight of Whiteness with Alison Bailey

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**Christiane Wisehart, host and producer:** I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Setting Pace]**

**Christiane:** On today's episode of Examining Ethics, philosopher Alison Bailey joins us to discuss the relationship between the head and the heart when thinking about race and privilege. She explains that it's not enough just to *think* through the harms of white supremacy.

**Alison Bailey:** We have lots of centers of intelligence and in Western analytic philosophy, the rush to the head is a disciplinary practice. And that can be helpful. But what philosophers don't do enough of, I think, is heart work. And that is actually sitting with those embodied feelings because we tend to think of epistemology in terms of thinking our way through problems or moral philosophy is thinking our way through judgements, a head thing. But our bodies are intelligence. There's centers of intelligence in the head, in the gut, in the heart. And there's a lot of information that we can gather about how the weight of whiteness is in our body by attending to the bodies.

**Christiane:** Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

**[music fades out]**

**Christiane:** Alison Bailey opens her new book with an invitation to “wade slowly and mindfully into the weight of whiteness, and to attend to the ways white supremacy has misshapen our nation, our communities, and our humanity.” She writes that while black, indigenous and people of color feel the weight of whiteness daily, most white people tend to numb themselves to this weight.

She argues that white people need to do the work of investigating the weight of whiteness, and its effects not just on the mind, but also on the heart.

**[interview begins]**

**Christiane:** So, we're here today to discuss Alison Bailey's new book, *The Weight of Whiteness*. What is the weight that you're exploring in this book?

**Alison Bailey:** So my starting point for the conversation is this famous metaphor that Peggy Macintosh uses about whiteness, white supremacy, in particular white privilege being an invisible and weightless knapsack. And what happens when people engage this is we go toward the visible. So we start naming white privileges, the public trust and being able to shop without being followed. But we never talk about the weight. So why is the knapsack full of these

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privileges weightless? And I want to say that it's weightless because we have anesthetized ourselves to the pain of whiteness. And what I mean by that is there's a bargain that's made with whiteness and James Baldwin talks about this as the price of the ticket. And he says, the price of the ticket is our humanity.

So think about what white people have to surrender to belong. And it turns us into people who see the world wrongly who have sometimes difficulties being around so-called non-white people. It makes us feel entitled. It makes us hoard opportunities, things like that. So the weight is something that's psychological and it's a wound that goes back 400 years. So I want to encourage readers to take up that weight and to sit and hold it in ways that make us feel very uncomfortable.

**Christiane:** And this is a weight that all white people carry, right? We can't help but have this weight?

**Alison Bailey:** I think so though I have been challenged on this because white experiences are very, very varied. There's some of us like me who have a deep settler colonial ancestry and others that are the descendants of Italian or Polish immigrants that came to the continent in the early 20th century. So there are different textures of that weight, but a simple way to put it is the weight can be measured in the costs and losses to our humanity. And no matter when you arrive in North America or South America, eventually the Irish became white. Eventually Polish people became white. So there's an assimilation and there's a price to that. You have to give up a lot to belong. And a lot of that is your culture, your language, your religious practices.

**Christiane:** And white children born in this country are taught to be white.

**Alison Bailey:** I think so.

**Christiane:** Could you tell us about the childhood experience that informs a lot of your work in this book and a lot of the work on the teaching of white children?

**Alison Bailey:** So when I was six years old, I sat in the second floor bedroom of my parents' rented home in West Orange and I watched Newark burn and I couldn't figure out what that was. There was an orange glow in the sky and then my father would watch the news and it was seven days of what was called rioting then, but it was an uprising which like most violence against communities of color began with a misunderstanding of a taxi cab driver parking somewhere. The riots or the uprising begins. And I started to get a series of messages about that was not our Newark and that the Puerto Rican and black residents of Newark, it was their fault. There was something about them that caused this rather than systemic racism or injustice or poverty, or lack of opportunity that made people very, very volatile. And so I started seriously getting a number of messages about why whiteness was valuable and why the residents of Newark were less valuable.

And George Yancy has a beautiful metaphor that he talks about the clicks that install. So there's this famous analogy of, and black men and women talk about this all the time about walking by

cars with white people in it and how the windows go up and the doors lock. And that's this fear that we learn, we learn to fear black and brown bodies. So I remember that, and I remember going to a playground that was mainly black and Puerto Rican and how scared my mother was to take us there and how she got scolded by my father, because it was constructed in the white imagination as an unsafe space. And in reality it was just mothers taking their kids to play and catch up and have coffee. But yeah, so those are the few of the messages I got and those carried forward my whole life with the use of racial slurs and derogatory terms and warnings about who I should and should not date.

**Christiane:** Those conversations are part of what gradually erodes the humanity of white people, correct?

**Alison Bailey:** It does. And the reason it erodes our humanity is it breaks connections between us. We're hardwired for connection. But when you keep saying we need to keep an eye on "those people" or don't play with "those people", that breaks connections and kids pick up on this and it doesn't have to be a sit down and now you're going to have the lesson about who not to trust and who to keep an eye on and who to be hypervigilant around. You get it in movements and quiet silences and unspoken things like my father literally when we drive through Newark, used to roll up the windows and lock the doors and he didn't say anything, but kids are smart. They pick up on that and they feel that Dad is scared. I'm scared. What is he scared of? I should be scared too.

**Christiane:** It was so interesting to read this book because I had just taken part in an anti-racist training and the woman who taught the workshop kept talking about rehumanizing white people. And that taking part in conversations about race was part of the rehumanization process, part of putting our humanity back together. But why is it so difficult for white people to join in on these weighty conversations about race?

**Alison Bailey:** Oh, because we always go toward comfort. It's Robin DiAngelo's notion of white fragility, but it's also, think about how our bodies are wired for comfort. We just always seek out comfort. It's just part of who we are as human beings. So what I find a lot when I do conversations with white people on whiteness is they always want to go to the places where they're affirmed, where they're innocent, where they're seen as a good white person, rather than those bad white people. So they always, whiteness I say has a gravitational pull that draws white people into the conversations that go something like this: "Oh, now I know what white privilege is. I can name white privileges. Okay. I'm good. I'm done." But that's the easy work. That's the work of the head that allows us to see, to make systems visible.

So that's unpacking the knapsack, just the first part. This overexposed side of the knapsack metaphor where I can say privilege is invisible. I'm going to make it visible by naming it. And that's a good place to start, but white people stop there and we don't do the work of the heart, which is the difficult work, the emotional work of sitting with the weight of whiteness and what whiteness has done to us and to our humanity collectively.

**Christiane:** That was something that I found so interesting in your book because you're a

philosopher and you kept repeating that idea -- we've done the work in our heads. Now it's time to do the heart work. So what does heart work have to do with philosophy or ethics?

**Alison Bailey:** We have lots of centers of intelligence and in Western analytic philosophy, the rush to the head is a disciplinary practice. And that can be helpful. I don't want to dismiss those skills because we need conceptual tools to talk about things, but where philosophers at least today don't do enough of, I think is heart work. And that is actually sitting with those embodied feelings because we tend to think of epistemology in terms of thinking our way through problems or moral philosophy as thinking our way through judgements, a head thing. But our bodies are intelligence. There's centers of intelligence in the head, in the gut, in the heart and Shannon Sullivan talks about the guts of white people. And there's a lot of information that we can gather about how the weight of whiteness is in our body by attending to the bodies. So I think about the ways that, for example, my body will jump when a black man appears suddenly and it's precognitive and it's like, how did that get in there?

And then I'll say, oh, it's just my colleague, but there's this jumping in my body. So what's that about? And it's very easy for us to retreat to the head and say, oh, I'll explain it away. It's just, I would be startled if anybody showed up. It's like, no, you wouldn't. This is a different texture of being startled. And so how did that get there and what can I learn from it? And how can I not flee from that experience? That's damage. That breaks connection. What that does is kick into the "I need to be hypervigilant about black bodies. I need to guard myself. I don't feel safe." And it's in your body and it's sort of stunning. So we've tried very hard to think our way out of racism and philosophers, including myself, have spent a lot of time puzzling through these in a cerebral way. But as Resmaa Menakem says, racism doesn't live in the head, it lives in the body, it's white body supremacy. And that was a game changer for me.

**Christiane:** Can you say a little bit more about white body supremacy?

**Alison Bailey:** Well, it's Menakem's term and what he says is our bodies are hardwired to respond to stimuli that are threatening with fight, flight, freeze, fawn, tend and befriend. So what happens when that autonomic nervous system gets paired with white supremacy, because that's the way bodies function, but culturally you can orient the fears along racial lines. So what happens when white body supremacy is in us? So we need to do the work of the heart to get free from that. And as long as white people don't want to do that work, we will continue to blow our trauma and pain through communities of color and bodies of color.

**Christiane:** It's almost like the way that you're talking about it, it's making me think it's almost a loaded gun that we've got in our hands and we don't even really know that there's a loaded gun in our hands. And then suddenly we look down and we realize, oh my God, I'm holding a loaded gun. What do I do about that? Yeah.

**Alison Bailey:** Yeah. And I can give you an example about how subtle this is and how powerful it is because I've been thinking about these issues for 25 years and I'm just always astounded at

the depth of what's in my body. So in 2016 after the elections and all the anti-Arab terrorism stuff that was stirring around with the last administration, I boarded a flight to Washington DC and a woman in a hijab sat down next to me and started pulling out her phone. And she had her earphones in and her running shoes on. And she was running a stopwatch from five to zero over and over and over again. And I started feeling this panic in my body and I was like, where did this come from? But it was the Muslim/terrorist/bomb/stopwatch/bomb thing.

And I didn't know where this came from. I had spent a lot of time in Middle Eastern communities. I was partnered with a man who was Middle Eastern origin and all of a sudden this stuff showed up. So how did it get there? There were all these cultural messages about flying and fear. And if you see something, say something and then it occurred to me that those messages had hijacked my autonomic nervous system. So I was scared of this woman. And what she was doing is just fiddling with an app on her phone and put on her music and the flight took off and that was it. But I just felt this, should I press the call button? And it was like, wow, that is in my body. That's how easy it is for white supremacy to hijack your body.

**Christiane:** I wondered as I was reading your book, is it okay to center white people again in this conversation about weight?

**Alison Bailey:** Yes and no, that's something I struggled with very much. And I tried to build as many disclaimers as I could into the conversation because what happens when we talk about whiteness is white people tend to make it all about us and center all of us. So I like to think of this as a cautious question about focusing on whiteness, but not making all of it about us. So I think it's okay to move us to the center with the idea of, we have to deal with this and then just pushing it off to the side and saying, well, I'll just support people of color. That lets us off the hook for the heart work.

And I think white people need to do this among ourselves. It's not the job of black indigenous and people of color to educate us on this. So I think you can do that without recentering whiteness, but you have to dance from the margin to the center so you don't get stuck in the center and say, look at me, I'm a good white person. I'm working on this stuff again.

**Christiane:** So, what are some of the ways that white supremacy breaks the moral compass of white people?

**Alison Bailey:** One of the things that whiteness does is make many of us see the world wrongly. So this is Charles Mill's basic intuition in "The Racial Contract" about how white people will look out into the world and see what is not there. So to give you a few examples from my own life, and this requires some humility, but again, you have to sit with that weight. So here's how I do it. Sometimes when I'm walking through the world, I try to be mindful of my responses to people of color in public spaces. So, you walk by a group of Latina/e men at a bus stop and your body goes, oh, it's a gang. And then it's like, no, they're waiting for the bus to go to work. I have seen the world wrongly or you get on a bus and some black folks walk on and sit next to

you and you grab your purse.

And it's like, they're not thieves. They are going to pick up their grandchildren or to work or they're living their lives. But we learn to see the world wrongly because part of whiteness is being hypervigilant. And this is a real easy way into this. So if you see the world wrongly, you make moral judgments wrongly about it because you have bad information, false information about who people are, what they're doing, what their moral characters are. So think about George Floyd and how the police turned him into this aggressive, hyper-criminal, drug-addicted person to the point where they killed him. So it's not just that we see the world wrongly, but these false perceptions have real life consequences for people of color's communities and families and bodies and everything.

**Christiane:** So, we've been talking a lot about the weight of whiteness that many of us, many white people carry in the present day. And that covers the first four chapters of your book and your last chapter shifts to an ancestral weight. It shifts to looking into the past. And I was really struck. The chapter really resonated with me because like you, I have a Northern European background. I haven't looked into it as much as you have and part of that is because I've always avoided genealogy in my adult life because I was afraid of what I would find. But then also I told myself, I think I was truly afraid of what I would find, but I told myself it was because I don't want to veer into white supremacist territory. I don't want to be celebrating my Germanic, Austrian background, but you write that genealogy can actually help white people reckon with the weight of whiteness rather than celebrating whiteness in some way. And so what is genealogy without anesthesia?

**Alison Bailey:** Okay, I can give you an example. But let me tell you what genealogy *with* anesthesia looks like. So we can move from there. The example I use comes from Henry Lewis Gates' PBS series, "Finding Your Roots." So he interviewed Ben Affleck at one point and as he was interviewing Ben Affleck, he found out that Affleck's ancestors, the Cole family, had enslaved 25 people of African descent on their plantation in the south. And Affleck was blown away by that. But then after the episode was over, the anesthesia kicked in. And so he started saying, I want you to cut this out of the show. I don't want anybody knowing that my ancestors were slave owners. And it went to the point where Gates had to stop the series.

So that's the power of whiteness to shut stuff down. So he chose anesthesia over knowledge because he felt bad. He felt shame. So he was unable to hold the weight there. He just would rather erase it, anesthetize himself. Genealogy without anesthesia requires that you walk into those painful parts of the past and sit with them and hold space with historical weight that lives in our bodies. So, a lot of people have said in different ways, the past isn't even in the past, it's always remains with us and it's in our bodies. I think we inherit some of that weight through what our ancestors did and didn't do. So doing genealogy without anesthesia for me required that instead of finding things that made me uncomfortable, walking into them. And there's a whole literature of white people going back and finding out that their ancestors were part of lynching parties or owned huge plantations. And what they've done is walk into that pain and learn about

their ancestors.

And then also, and this is the brave and remarkable thing, try to get in touch with the descendants of the people that were harmed. So Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family*, not only does he talk about the eight or the six plantations that his ancestors owns, he identifies the people that they owned and reaches out to some of the families and is able to go back to that space with them and do a healing. And that takes courage, time, energy, and resources. But man, that's how you get free. And there's a lot of epistemic pushback on these projects because a lot of people don't want to know. So part of seeing the world wrongly is, oh, there was no slavery in the north. I don't have to look. There was slavery in New Jersey until 1865. Emancipation happened earlier by people manumitting enslaved Africans, but it took the Reconstruction to finalize that, which is stunning. So why don't we know that? That's the anesthesia.

**Christiane:** And what's the ancestral weight that you have to reckon with?

**Alison Bailey:** Well, I have to reckon with the fact that my Morgan and Van Wickle ancestors were part of a slave trafficking or a trafficking ring that... How can I put this? They trafficked enslaved Africans from the north to the south, after the price of those human beings dropped in the north because slavery was being phased out in New Jersey. The Dutch introduced that to Manhattan and then into New Jersey and then the English continued with it. So my ancestors, the Morgans, owned people and used those people, not only on their farms, but in their pottery business. And then when the market fell out, my great great great uncle Judge Jacob Van Wickle and my fourth great grandfather developed a scheme to traffic bodies to New Orleans, to a plantation that their brother Charles Morgan started by the name of Morganza Louisiana. And they trafficked over 137 people to do brutal work. This is cotton and indigo and sugar cane in hot climates where people just basically were worked to death. They were promised labor and promised freedom and they were just worked to death, most of them. And they got caught, but no one was ever charged. So I stumbled upon this and I put together a family history and it was received well by most of my cousins, but a few of them were like, why do you have to make our story so heavy? Why do you have to bring this up?

They like the story of General Morgan as a hero of the revolution who was incarcerated in the salt house in lower Manhattan and survived, and was wealthy beyond comparison for those times and wrote to George Washington and had a series of letters between the general, during the battle of Monmouth. That's the story they want to hold onto. So they like the anesthesia and you can hold onto that, but you have to tell the whole unvarnished truth about the family history. You can't just hang onto the parts that shine and make you feel good.

**Christiane:** Is *The Weight of Whiteness* a work of philosophy?

**Alison Bailey:** Yeah, it is.

**Christiane:** Have you ever had philosophers tell you that this ancestral work, this writing is maybe not philosophy or gets away from philosophy or have you had any criticism in that realm?

**Alison Bailey:** Not yet, but over my career, the philosophy I do, I hear that a lot. And I think what that border guarding is about is a fear of philosophy being watered down in some way, but I don't see it that way because we're not just thinking beings, we're feeling things. So it's not that we're these Cartesian selves that move through the world. And I think some of the best philosophy these days is public philosophy. So I think of all the work that people in my field and feminist epistemology and ethics are doing is of writing articles for "The Stone" and *The New York Times* that are very accessible accounts of deep ideas.

So, is my work philosophy? Of course it is. It's very analytic, but it's analytic with a heart. When I wrote the book, I chose to do the philosophy up front and then to move from head to heart because the tools that the philosopher's toolkit gives me are clumsy when it comes to doing the work of making the anesthesia tangible and trying to do genealogy without anesthesia. And as Resmaa Menakem says, "we can't think our way out of race because racism doesn't live in our head. It lives in our bodies."

**[Interview ends]**

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Ice Tumbler]**

**Christiane:** If you want to know more about Alison Bailey's other work, or some of the things we mentioned in today's episode, check out our shownotes page at [examiningethics.org](http://examiningethics.org).

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