Reconsidering Reparations with Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Single Still]

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.

Reparations and climate change might at first glance seem unrelated. My guest Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò argues that they are inextricably linked, and that racial justice cannot happen without climate justice.

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, guest: So the question that you have to ask is, is a world that is 2, 3, 4, 5 degrees Celsius warmer than this one, a good foundation for racial justice? Is that going to provoke the kinds of political responses from the powers that be, the kinds of material situations of desertification and sea level rise and hurricanes? Is that a set of scenarios under which we think we can even protect the racial justice wins we've already got, much less win more?

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

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Christiane: Slavery caused a racial wealth gap that exists to this day in America. According to the Brookings Institution, "Black Americans are the only group that has not received reparations for state-sanctioned racial discrimination while slavery afforded some white families the ability to accrue tremendous wealth." In their Brookings policy brief on the issue of reparations, Rashawn Ray and Andre Perry argue that the United States government owes a debt to descendants of enslaved people and descendants of Black Americans who faced racial discrimination. They outline several forms of repayment, including free college tuition, down payments for housing and business grants.

My guest today, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, makes a much more expansive and philosophical case for reparations. In his book *Reconsidering Reparations*, he outlines the connections between colonialism, climate change and racial oppression. He makes a powerful argument for reparations centered around climate justice.

[interview begins]

Christiane: So, there are a lot of different ways to define reparations, and I want to know, first of all, just briefly, how do you define the term?

Olúfémi Táíwò: In the book I go for a view of reparations that I call the constructive view. And on the constructive view, reparations is the just distribution of the costs of moving us from this unjust world to the just one.

Christiane: What are some of the problems that you've identified with some of the common arguments for reparations?

Olúfémi Táíwò: So, I group the common arguments for reparations into two families, basically. One is the harm-repair view of reparations. So, on the harm-repair view, reparations is supposed to just make a material difference to the lives of the people receiving reparations. So, the target population might be different. It might be the population of the Caribbean. It might be the population of the African continent. It might be African-American descendants of the enslaved. It might be first nations in Canada. But whoever the group is, the point of reparations is to move them from some standard of living or welfare to a higher one.

And then on the second view of reparations, that I call the relationship-repair view, the point is to change the relationships between the group of people receiving reparations and some other group, maybe the political institutions of a country, or a set of countries, maybe their neighbors who are non-black and non-indigenous, perhaps, but improve some set of social relationships. And both of those are responding to what they see as problems in the present that are connected to, or maybe even constituted by, past harms and injustices. The focus is on looking backwards to find both the source of the problem and the thing that is supposed to be eliminated, whether it's the source of today's bad relationships or the source of today's lowered amount of welfare or wealth. And I think, broadly, both of those in the particular case of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism, I think really undersell what trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism were.

They certainly include important events of atrocities and injustices, but it wasn't as though they just caused problems in the past that are with us today. The events of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism literally built the world. They are the events that constructed the global political and economic system that we have now, and that explain some of its most basic and fundamental characteristics. And so what I'm trying to go for in the constructive use to acknowledge both that levels of welfare in populations and social relationships have been adversely affected, or I should say constituted by that world political system, but we also need to fix the world political system itself.

Christiane: You've already mentioned a little bit about what it means to have a constructive view of reparations, but what does the constructive part of that mean?

Olúfémi Táíwò: One of the concepts I talk about a lot in the book comes from Adom Getachew's work, *Worldmaking after Empire* that was talking about the political contributions of a wave of activists who were acting in the post-second-World-War world. And as she characterizes them, they weren't just bucking against this or that empire. There were hundreds

of national independence movements fighting off Imperial domination, but they were also fighting to construct something, to build a new kind of political order across and within the economies of the world and the now newly-independent countries, those much of the global south, much of Asia and Africa. One in which different people in different parts of the world could work together and relate to each other and trade with each other on terms of solidarity and cooperation, rather than Imperial domination.

So, it wasn't just a matter of fighting back a particular system of colonialism and apartheid, but it certainly had to include that. But it was also about building new structures, challenging the way that the UN functioned, building what they called a New International Economic Order, which would relate these countries to each other on what they thought to be more egalitarian terms. And we have that kind of struggle in our lifetimes, our generations.

We're going to have to build a new energy system than the one that was built by this very same history and out of these very same economic and political connections. And that is going to be, in part, about dismantling a system that runs on fossil fuels, but is going to be in the very same strokes for the very same set of reasons, a set of putting something else in place that is likewise just as valuable. Is that system one that provides energy access and security for all? That's compatible with housing security for all? That gives everyone basic material resources? Or is it one that exploits the many for the security of the few? The status quo is pushing us in the latter direction, but reparations and justice and reparations would push us towards the former.

Christiane: If somehow a listener has not been paying attention for the last 10 years or so, it's easy for those of us in the United States to think, first of all, that reparations is just about slavery, just about fixing the problems that came up with slavery, or that reparations would just be about like writing a check or something. But the constructive view is basically saying, "No, it's the whole world." And then it's also: righting those wrongs would require completely remaking the world. Am I getting that correctly?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: Yes.

Christiane: With those two things, I really appreciated your focus on cumulative disadvantages and advantages. And I was wondering, why is it important to focus on the cumulative part of that?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: Part of it is a point about scale, and in particular, thinking about accumulation helps us think about the scale of time that we're up against, how long it took to build the kind of wealth, whether at the country or community or even household level that we're intervening in when we talk about, for example, non-discrimination or wage parity at the workplace. One thing that confounds people is the massive difference between levels of wealth in black households and white households, just for one instance, right? Or at a different scale, the massive difference between levels of wealth comparing the global north nations with nations of the global south, and people think, "Well, the only ways we can explain this are maybe inherent genetic differences," for the kinds of people that go straight for regular racism, you could say, or the

people who are a little clever about it say, "Well, maybe there's kind of ingrained cultural differences that explain why all of the wealth is over here and all of the poverty and toxins and violence are over there."

But really, on the scale of human civilizations, the amount of time that a lot of these countries have been independent is quite short. My dad is older than the country of Nigeria, right? Like my parents were born colonial subjects of the British empire. We're not talking about ancient history on a civilizational scale. We're talking about the imprint of centuries of processes, of accumulation, the imprint economically, the imprint culturally, the imprint in terms of state capacity, the imprint in terms of the buildup of institutions like universities, research capacity, all of these kinds of things that decide in real material senses where knowledge is, where wealth is, where toxins are, and pollutants are. And those kinds of things, the distribution of those kinds of things are decisive for people's living conditions and life opportunities. And if we tell the truth about those things, we're going to find the imprint of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism in each of them.

Christiane: What's distributive justice? What does that mean?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: So, for me, distributive justice is, at its most simple, the justice of who gets what. And I think everyone would agree that how we know who gets what share of the pies, whether or not there's wage gaps, all of these questions about who has what level of access to important goods like healthcare and so on and so forth, people would agree that those kinds of questions have implications for justice. Those kinds of questions are justice-evaluable. I think the difference between the way that I'm using the concept of distributive justice, and some concepts of distributive justice is the number of political issues that I would put under the heading of distributive justice, right? For some people, distributive justice is a question about income taxes and transfers. And if you want to know how institutions should be designed or what kind of rights people should have, or do have, those are other topics of justice.

But for me, I think all those things are intimately related. And I kind of think of them under the same heading. In particular, one thing that's tied to the question you asked immediately before this, is this idea of accumulation. Thinking of toxic waste sites and universities and bank accounts all as being sites of historical accumulation that we can ask questions of distributive justice about, and that we should ask questions of distributive justice about. That way of thinking about it requires us to achieve justice on long time scales and one off transfers of cash–just giving everybody a check tomorrow and calling that reparations–would only achieve distributive justice in the sense that I think of a distributive justice, if we thought that it would have the imprint of changing all of those attendant accumulations, the accumulations of universities, the accumulations of state capacity, or collective capacity broadly construed, the accumulations of toxic waste, all of those things. If we don't think that one distribution of checks would fix all those accumulations, then I think we need a broader strategy.

Christiane: We've kind of mentioned before that there are different ways of thinking about reparations, and a sort of simplistic way of thinking about it might be Company X has billions of dollars in its bank account. And Company X has billions of dollars in its bank account because

in the 19th century they built their wealth on slave labor. And so reparations might mean Company X gives most of their money to descendants of slaves. But what you're saying, you're saying something bigger, which is that "No, no, no, we change the world so that a Company X can't ever do that again." And also that the wrongs of the past were righted. Am I getting that right?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: Yeah, I think that's right. I might say an additional thing though. So, it's not that we throw away that kind of historical analysis that was in the first bit. So, for example, Citibank profited off of the various US imperial intrigue around Haiti. Let's say we had a calculation of how many dollars Citibank had. That would be very difficult to disentangle from the larger story of Haiti. Why it was that Haiti was financially dependent in the first place, which involved indemnity payments that France required them to pay, not Citibank or even the United States, where Citibank is based. And it involved the non-recognition of Haiti, and thus the economic struggles it was put into by much of the other countries of this hemisphere.

So, the actual calculus of causality would be a bit complicated to sort through. So, we could acknowledge that Citibank has been unjustly enriched by their connection with this history, but rather than trying to answer the backward looking question of exactly how much has Citibank been enriched by this? We could ask a different question of Citibank. We could ask, what would it take for all the various people who were complicit in centuries of plunder and slavery, of Haiti? What would it take to put them in a better position, on a path to self-determination and being able to meet its material, social and cultural needs in a way that was based on solidarity rather than continued projection of clandestine force from places like the United States? What would that project involve? And what is Citibank's share of that project? How much of that project do they have to fund? That's a different set of calculations than the backward-looking one. The backward-looking one is about all these complicated counterfactual questions about what would've happened if these actors had done this and Citibank had done that.

These forward-looking questions are about what the sea level's going to be, which is going to play a role in what Haiti's political future is and what will be required, materially speaking, for it to have self-determination over its own political path and for the people of Haiti to have self-determination over their own political path. That's going to require knowing what temperature it's going to be or what pace of global warming we're at. It's going to require knowing how rainfall will be affected, how fishing will be affected, et cetera, et cetera. All these practical questions that, I think, are intimately bound up with the things that we want reparations to accomplish, but that often get left out of the practical story, when reparations is thought of under the heading of these different kinds of arguments for reparations, that are backward looking and focused on repair.

Christiane: Could you expand on the last part of what you were saying, because a big part of your argument is that reparations require climate justice, and that's another sort of expansive idea that I hadn't yet connected to reparations before.

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: There are all kinds of conceptual and historical connections between colonialism and climate change. Trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism built the planet-sized system that caused the Industrial Revolution. So, in a very literal sense, we're talking about the same set of issues at bottom. But the connection between reparations and climate justice is…I think the more important connection between them is actually a lot more mundane of a kind of reasoning. It's just basic practicality. Reparations, as I've understood it, is a constructive project, right? If you were going to build a house somewhere, you would have some basic questions about the foundation. Can it support the weight of a house? Is this a good site?

You would have to take practical stock of the situation that you're trying to intervene in to do the constructive project that you're trying to do. Geopolitically, this is no different. If you're trying to build racial justice, you need to think about the conditions under which you're undertaking that project. That's the foundation, politically and socially speaking, for any change that you try to make. And so the question that you have to ask is, is a world that is 2, 3, 4, 5 degrees Celsius warmer than this one, a good foundation for racial justice? Is that going to provoke the kinds of political responses from the powers that be, the kinds of material situations of desertification and sea level rise and hurricanes? Is that a set of scenarios under which we think we can even protect the racial justice wins we've already got, much less win more? I suspect not, especially in the absence of a serious climate justice movement that is also, at the same time, a serious racial justice movement.

It's going to take deliberate political effort to reverse and stem the political trajectories that are active in the present moment, that would lead us to very bad racial justice outcomes of the kind that we saw a horrifying preview of in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in the decades to come.

Christiane: I wonder if at this point in the interview, which is about sort of halfway through your ideas and halfway through the book, it's an overwhelming idea to think about. And it's overwhelming to try to think about remaking the world and the systems that have created the world, but you offer what I see as a very hopeful, optimistic alternative, which is the processual approach. So, could you explain what that is?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: In the last chapter of the book, I talk about this perspective that I think a lot of us have some kind of cultural connection to, but that all of us can adopt, which is the moral perspective of an ancestor. And I think it's the way that I reconcile the mammoth scale of this task with a kind of realism about what aspects of it I think are accomplishable on the scale of a human lifetime.

It's an ordinary ability that people have, to join their actions with people across huge time scales. I give the example of a person who's making soy sauce in traditional fashion because their grandfather and grandfather's neighbor, about a century ago now, decided to plant the trees that eventually became the source of wood for these barrels. I don't imagine they had some perfect prediction about what the 21st century would be like. I think they just, as many generations of

people did before them and did after them and hopefully will continue to do, they acted in a sort of faith and a sort of knowledge. Faith that the people that came after them would be people capable of responding to the kind of action that they were doing in their time. And the knowledge that the ability of people in the future to respond to new circumstances would depend on the circumstances they inherited from their decisions on that day. And our descendants stand in the same relation to us. The opportunities that they're going to have are won and lost on the basis of what we win and lose now.

But that means that we can be part of victories that we may not be here to see. And the scale of the thing that we're trying to accomplish, maybe we can do it tomorrow. I don't know, but if we can't do it tomorrow, if we can't do it in the next 100 years, that doesn't mean that it's not practically relevant to us. We can be part of whatever happens 100 years from now, or 200 years from now, or 300 years from now, or 100 days from now. And that's enough. For generations, for centuries, for millennia, that's had to be enough for a lot of generations of people who were constantly undertaking projects that other generations started and that other generations would have to take up or maybe even complete. And I think one of the things to resist about the kind of individualism that proliferates through our current political system is the need to respond only to the kinds of things that we ourselves, as individual human beings, can experience and live out. There are other things to value, and this kind of social change might be one of those.

Christiane: What are some tactics that we can adopt if we want to start acting like an ancestor? What are some things we can start doing now?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: I think one of the most important things we can do is to try to start setting up the political institutions and the political and actual infrastructure that are going to be needed for justice in the future. That means creating the kind of political balance of power that's compatible with justice in the future, getting control of public resources into public hands. And I think it also means changing our literal physical environment in a way that's also compatible with justice in the future. That means making sure not only that we expand access to energy, safe housing, clean water for as many people as possible, especially those who have been most preyed upon by the construction of this unjust world–black and indigenous people–but also making sure that those structures are climate-resilient. And climate-resilient means resilient both in terms of the likely impacts of ecological crisis. So, resilient to heat waves and providing serious protection against famine and food insecurity, but also from the likely political results of our current social structure and the likely direction that politics will go in a warming world. That means community-level control of these resources.

Left in the hands of investors, the safety of these institutions is poorly managed, the breadth of access to energy and housing are rationed for profit, and they're rarely managed for the needs of the people who rely on them. And that is particularly true, disproportionately true, for black and indigenous working-class people. So, we need to build the kinds of actual physical structures, but also political structures around them that would be resilient against these problems.

Christiane: So, what brought you to this work? Why do you care about this issue in particular?

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: In general, I focus on race and colonialism in my philosophical work. When I started working on reparations, I didn't realize how central it would be to how I eventually thought of those issues. I was working on more kind of boring, wonky thoughts in political philosophy. You know, what's good trade policy? What's a good educational or public health set of policies? But anytime I tried to answer these "regular questions" of politics, on a time scale longer than a few years, I started running head-first into climate politics and climate questions.

You know, what's the level of disruption going to be from weather events? Literally, where will the desert be, given the rate of desertification right? And increasingly, as I ran up against those, I started to come to the view that really climate politics just is politics in this century. It's not because of any conceptual connection between the idea of climate and the idea of politics. Though there's plenty of those. But just from a practical perspective, these kinds of questions are going to be decisive of political opportunities in the years and decades to come.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Chaunce Libertine]

Christiane: If you want to know more about Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò's other work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org.

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