How does our understanding of the reality (or lack thereof) of race as a category of being affect our understanding of racism as a social phenomenon, and vice versa? How should we envision the aims and methods of our struggles against racism? Traditionally, the Western political and philosophical tradition held that true social justice points toward a race-less future — that racial categories are themselves inherently racist, and a sincere advocacy for social justice requires a commitment to the elimination or abolition of race altogether. This book focuses on the underlying assumptions that inform this view of race and racism, arguing that it is ultimately bound up in a politics of purity — an understanding of human agency, and reality itself, as requiring all-or-nothing categories with clear and unambiguous boundaries. Racism, being organized around a conception of whiteness as the purest manifestation of the human, thus demands a constant policing of the boundaries among racial categories. Drawing upon a close engagement with historical treatments of the development of racial categories and identities, the book argues that races should be understood not as clear and distinct categories of being but rather as ambiguous and indeterminate (yet importantly real) processes of social negotiation. The author takes seriously the way in which racial categories, in all of their variety and ambiguity, situate and condition our identity, while emphasizing our capacity, as agents, to engage in the ongoing contestation and negotiation of the meaning and significance of those very categories.
“The True Faith”
Rushmir Mahmutćehajić

in On Love: In the Muslim Tradition

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It is possible to understand that injunction to stand firm in one's devotion to “the true faith” also as directing man toward his deepest human nature: a person is nothing other than a debt to the Creator and complete, original purity. Given that faith is the same as love, the human core or the uncreated and uncreatable Divine breath in man is His love of beauty. The transformation of the will into love, as man's striving for Peace, includes the recognition of the verticality that begins from each of his states and leads toward fullness. The possibility of such a recognition of man's being in the center of the surface with a multitude of paths is transformed into intention: the self is revealed on the edge and is directed toward the center. Such an intention is submission. Intention and submission are inseparable from desire and will. Love is the aim that confirms sense and suffering, which it transforms into a way of bearing witness to its fullness in the world of phenomena.

Pure Gentleness?
Anne Dufourmantelle

in Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living

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Gentleness must contain the seed of its opposite in order to maintain its agency. Violence is proof that that gentleness may not be fully received in this world. Dufourmantelle discusses literary characters who embody innocence and are its tragic heroes. She discusses Billy Budd by Herman Melville, The Man Who Laughs by Victor Hugo, and “A Simple Heart” by Gustave Flaubert.
In order to articulate an account of racial ontology that transcends the politics of purity, it is necessary to spell out in more detail exactly what the politics of purity is and how it operates. Broadly understood, the politics of purity holds that the norm toward which racial categories and racialized individuals ought to strive, or are even driven, is one of purity. The claim is not that the categories and individuals actually are pure but only that they ideally should be — it is in this way that it is the politics, and not the reality, of purity. Even outright rejections of race, such as racial eliminativism and the new abolitionism, participate in the politics of purity insofar as it is precisely because the categories and individuals cannot live up to this standard of purity that they should be eliminated or abolished. This chapter articulates a more in-depth account of the politics of purity and elaborates its failures to understand important questions about race and biology.

“Becoming” White: Race, Reality, and Agency

Much of the discourse on the relation between race and biology is mired in positivism. Phenomenology, from Edmund Husserl on, has been characterized first and foremost by a commitment to placing human consciousness at the center of philosophical investigation. If human subjectivity is understood in this way as a process situated and conditioned by embodiment, history, and sociality, then race must be understood as a significant aspect of identity, at least within the contemporary context. Because the politics of purity tends toward an atomistic ontology of the human in which the ideal of liberty is expressed in terms of the purity of an internal self free of external and unchosen impositions and constraints, it tends toward a rather generous definition of coercion. Anti-racism demands the struggle to participate fully in the ongoing negotiation of racial meaning — it demands, in other words, the
assertion of our own fully human (and thus embodied and even raced) agency and that of others.

The Politics of Purity: Colonialism, Reason, and Modernity
Michael J. Monahan

in The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity

In terms of racial ontology, the politics of purity operates normatively to prescribe clearly bounded categories of being admitting of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership such that each individual is unambiguously a member of one and only one racial category. This chapter proposes an approach to race such that it is understood as a dynamic process of contesting and negotiating the position from and through which we constitute meaning in and of the world, including especially the meaning of race itself. It offers an account of how the politics of purity impacts our understanding of racism as a social phenomenon, attending especially to its norming function in relation to racial whiteness, and its links to the hegemony of a particular understanding of reason. It argues that racism is intimately connected to the politics of purity, insofar as it has functioned as an effort to purify the self on the more individual level, and to purify humanity as a whole at the more social and political levels. This chapter also discusses colonialism, mixed race, and modernity.

Creolizing Subjects: Antiracism and the Future of Philosophy
Michael J. Monahan

The politics of purity is to be understood as informing both the ontology of race itself and the practice of racial oppression (racism), emphasizing the way in which these two moments are constitutively interrelated and interdependent. If this project is motivated by a desire to confront and address the problem of racial oppression, then it is necessary at this point to offer an account of anti-racist praxis — of liberation and racial justice. The politics of purity constrains our thinking about anti-
racism and liberation in several ways. For example, the politics of purity demands that racial categories be exclusive and distinct, and that individuals belong to one and only one such category. In addition, the positivistic foundation underlying the politics of purity construes racism as the ongoing practice of the purification of reason and thus humanity. This chapter offers an account of the creolizing subject and the creolization of philosophy.

Going Along For the Ride: Violence and Gesture—agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes
Simon Morgan Wortham and Gary Hall
in Experimenting: Essays with Samuel Weber
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The “state of exception” thus serves as the pretext of a violence bent on justifying and reproducing a political-legal system that presents itself as the indispensable condition of that “minimal order” required in order for life to be livable. “Purity” thus is not a characteristic of immanence, not a property, but, as Agamben notes, a “relational” category. In the case of violence, he continues, “purity” should be sought not in “violence itself” (pas dans la violence meme), but “in its relation to something external.” Anything that defines its “purity” or identity in terms of its relation to something else is, of course, a “means.”

Mixture and Purity
Jeremy Barris
in The Crane's Walk: Plato, Pluralism, and the Inconstancy of Truth
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The eighth idea basic to Plato concerns the importance of the confused mixture of considerations, meanings, dimensions, characteristics, and viewpoints in which thinking (and acting) begins. This chapter emphasizes that the recognition and articulation of the context of thought as a confused mixture of aspects is itself a product of careful thinking; it is a decision about the truth of what is basically real. It is therefore itself artificial. Consequently, as with the “sometimes” logic, one needs to achieve the posture of not thinking in terms of either a
simple contrast or a simple lack of contrast between mixture and purity. As a result, mixture itself involves, and is what allows, purity of thought and truth. This includes the purity of the artificiality of thought.

The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis
Catherine Keller

in Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality
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Apophatic theology has little to (un)say about bodies, whereas it speaks volumes about that which it deems worthy of unsaying. It treats bodies generally not as wicked or repulsive, but as sites of obstruction, suffering, distraction. Since feminist theology as a collective comprises a critical mass of that body-affirming movement, and since some are also dangerously attracted to the apophatic way, the cloud of the impossible engulfs the present exploration from the start. Nicholas of Cusa oddly appears as a mediator both of method and of content. He would plunge one not into an empty chasm but into the “cloud of impossibility”. The necessity of entering the “cloud of impossibility” is no mere metaphysical inevitability, but an all too familiar experience. If we do not cling to a certainty whose oppositional purity we doubt anyway, we enter the Cusan cloud. Then we may relinquish the binary structure of the impasse itself. This chapter examines the cloud of the impossible and the relation between deconstruction and negative theology.

Love and Justice
Aaron T. Looney

in Vladimir Jankélévitch: The Time of Forgiveness
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Drawing on comparisons with Arendt, Derrida, Ricoeur, and Levinas, this chapter addresses both the apparent incompatibility and the bond between love and justice by examining, on the one hand, the heterogeneity of the sphere of justice, exemplified by law, and the sphere of love, and, on the other hand, the points at which moral agents are confronted with a decision between these two spheres. It discusses the purity, reality, and ideality of love and forgiveness as a
reflection of the problem of closure. It establishes Jankélévitch's idea of forgiveness in the context of literature on the unconditionality of the gift and gratitude, and it explores the borders of finite creaturely forgiveness. As a gift, it argues, forgiveness comes via the tangential touching of the infinite in the finite. It comes as the unexpected advent of the unconditional at the limits of human strength, but it appears solely within the phenomenological horizon of anticipation and retention—that is, as other than itself.