

African-American Philosophers

17 Conversations

edited by
George Yancy

ROUTLEDGE
New York and London

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actions," in *Court of Appeal: The Racial-Sexual Politics of* (New York: [unclear] L. Allen, eds. (New York:

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[thirteen]

Joyce Mitchell Cook

Joyce Mitchell Cook holds the distinction of being the first African-American woman to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy in the United States. Cook also broke the barrier against hiring female assistant instructors at Yale College to teach in fields other than foreign languages. Indeed, she was the first woman appointee to teach in the philosophy department at Yale College (September 1959 to June 1961) and the first African-American woman to teach in the philosophy department at Howard University (September 1970 to June 1976). She has also taught philosophy at Connecticut College and Wellesley College. Cook received her A. B., with distinction in philosophy, from Bryn Mawr College (1955). She also received her B.A. and M.A. from Oxford University (1957, 1961) with high honors in a double major: philosophy and psychology. She went on to receive her Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale University (1965). Between 1959 and 1961, Cook was managing editor of *The Review of Metaphysics* (Yale University). Her area of specialization is value theory. In the early '70s, during the early formative historical period when a handful of Black philosophers were attempting to define the discursive field of Black philosophy, Cook participated in a number of pivotal panel and conference discussions on the nature of Black philosophy. Cook is currently working on a book project examining the concept of the Black experience. (A selection of her writings and public lectures follows this interview.)

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Joyce Mitchell Cook

George Yancy: When and where were you born?

Joyce Mitchell Cook: On October 28, 1933, in Sharon, Pennsylvania.

Yancy: Provide a sense of your precollege educational experience and which teachers were most influential in terms of your early intellectual development?

Cook: I was educated in the Sharon public schools through high school. Since I always liked school, I tended to like all of my teachers, and I cannot say that any one stood out more than others in the development of my intellectual interests. I liked every subject from the start as I still do today. When I was in the eighth grade, I believe it was, I came across the life story of Madame Curie, and from that time until my junior year in college, I committed myself to majoring in chemistry, but with a view toward teaching it. Teaching had been my goal from an early age, probably based on my observation of teachers in Sunday school. Of course I did not begin to study chemistry until my junior year in high school, but I stuck to the notion of chemistry for another four years.

Yancy: What impact did your parents have on your intellectual development?

Cook: My parents, particularly my mother, used to say that I could do anything that any one else did insofar as schoolwork was concerned. She was very much pro-education, meaning that she did not think that just because I was a female my destiny was determined. I think my father was more conventional in thinking that girls were supposed to get married after high school, although he supported my ambition because I seemed to be so determined.

Yancy: Did you demonstrate any early philosophical tendencies that you recall?

Cook: If philosophy is conceptual analysis, and I think that a good case can be made for the view that it is a great part, though not the be-all and end-all of philosophy, then yes, I suppose I did demonstrate an early penchant in that direction. However, in the early part of my life, up to college, my outlook was circumscribed to a large extent by religious categories, so I would not describe myself as having engaged in philosophical inquiry at an early age. On the other hand, I always had

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an ear for consistency, one of the cardinal philosophical virtues, and not infrequently stumbled onto what I would later learn to regard as philosophical issues simply by noticing and puzzling about inconsistencies.

Yancy: Were there any early experiences that may have impacted (negatively or positively) your early understanding of race?

Cook: Race was rarely explicitly mentioned in my household, though I suspect that when, for example, my mother would say that I could do as well as others, she probably had white people in mind. Sharon was, and still is, I believe, a largely white city in a largely white region of northwestern Pennsylvania. My neighbors were whites, a number of them of Eastern European background. In grade school and junior high, my best girlfriend was white, a girl who lived only a few doors away from me. We used to walk to school together. When it came time to go to high school, she no longer walked with me. She had found a new friend who had been in the parochial school system that went only up through junior high. They were of the same ethnicity and the same religion as well as the same race. In retrospect it makes great sense to me, but at the time I wondered that she did not bother to say goodbye.

I am convinced that the fact that my maternal grandmother (who lived close by), looked "passing white" accounted for the virtual silence about race in my home. Add to that my reluctance to generalize, and I think that goes far toward explaining why I did not see race as a "problem," until I was much older. But I was touched by it at the conclusion of eighth grade when I was denied the honor of being designated "high honor student," instead being acknowledged as having tied with three other persons. It was then I learned that two older brothers had been denied the same honor, which carried with it a year's free membership in a private boys' (or girls') club. My mother was afraid that I would be discouraged from educational interests, which is the only reason she told me about the earlier events. I reassured her that my interest was not in grades, that I worked because I liked school. I was not outraged moreover about the denial because I did not know then what I now know—that in academe one never rounds off grades for the purpose of assigning class rank. (Each of the tied persons was well known to me, and I am friendly with one even today.) If I had known academic ranking practice at the time, the experience to which I am referring might well have been the eye opener for me on race that it, mercifully I want to suggest, was not.

When I think of some of the things I pulled off, going to top schools in this country and England, for example, and my general cheekiness, as some would call it, I believe it was just as well that I was not aware of the "race problem," particularly of the widespread notion among whites that Blacks are intellectually inferior to whites (and perhaps I should include the fact that I was not aware that this same notion exists among Blacks).

Yancy: When did you first discover that there was a field called philosophy?

Cook: Well, when I was thirteen years old, I acquired a brother-in-law who had majored in philosophy and who later was to become a minister, like my father, who was largely self-taught. My father, however, used to mention Aristotle with some frequency, usually in the context of disparaging philosophy in favor of religion as, to quote him, "the panacea."

Yancy: What was it about your own self-understanding that may have helped you to decide that you wanted to pursue the field of philosophy?

Cook: I happened to have adored my father, though I distanced myself from his views while I was still in my teens. It was in college that I learned to appreciate philosophy as a breath of fresh air after having been encouraged to think that the truth was ready at hand. But it was not philosophy that turned my sights away from religion, it was the study of religion itself that did that. I took a course in textual or higher criticism during my freshman year—before I ever studied philosophy—and I began to understand religion as answering to a deep emotional need in humankind. I still understand it that way, and I am not opposed to it, because I believe that many people need an emotional crutch, a fail-safe support system in order to cope as best they can with the terms of existence that are beyond their control.

Yancy: Where did you do your undergraduate years and why there?

Cook: I went to Bryn Mawr based on the description of it that I read in a brochure in the high school guidance counselor's office. It indicated that the school had the reputation of being the most difficult of the Seven Sisters, and although I thought it would be more exotic to go to Massachusetts to Radcliffe or Wellesley than to stay in Pennsylvania, albeit Bryn Mawr was some 400 miles from Sharon, I was persuaded

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by the description. To be sure, I did not know anyone in Sharon who had even heard of Bryn Mawr.

Yancy: Who influenced you most at Bryn Mawr, and what courses did you take? I understand that you wrote your honors thesis on the philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza. Why Spinoza?

Cook: In my first philosophy course I studied under Isabelle Stearns, the only woman philosopher there at the time. Initially I was not too taken with the idea of studying under a woman philosopher. My conception of a philosopher, ill formed though it was, was based on the stereotype of a white-haired man. But at that time I was a chemistry major and organic chemistry lab (five hours on paper—easily twice that in practice) interfered with my taking philosophy at other times when sections of the course were being offered by male professors. As it turned out, I greatly admired Miss (we tended to use the title "Dr." for the men only) Stearns and asked her to direct my honors thesis. I chose Spinoza in part, I am sure, because I was taken by the idea of his geometrical method. As my early papers in philosophy demonstrated, I was prone to present philosophical issues in a barebones style, or otherwise put, without any padding. I was later to discover the desirability of a more graceful style.

Among other philosophers at Bryn Mawr I remember fondly Geddes MacGregor, a Scotsman who taught me medieval philosophy and who had a great sense of humor. For example, when, a year or so later, he had responded to my request to send a recommendation to Oxford, he told me that he was sure the recommendation he wrote would get me into heaven. Of course, he added, he couldn't be sure about Oxford!

Yancy: Were you the only Black female presence in your philosophy classes? And during this early period, how did you come to terms with the larger gender and racial implications of this?

Cook: Indeed, I was the only Black in my class, and one of only two Black undergraduates on campus when I entered. The numbers did not change very much during my four years. There had been one Black classmate in one class only in high school, and I had one class in common with the Black student at Bryn Mawr, a single semester of German, I believe it was. Subsequently through my student career up through my Ph.D., I never encountered any Blacks in my classes. You ask how I came to terms with gender and racial implications? I don't

think I did come to terms; I don't think I realized sufficiently the necessity of coming to terms. Even when it dawned on me that not very many women were in the field of philosophy—in those days you hardly ever ran across a paper or a book by a woman philosopher—I still decided to pursue philosophy through the Ph.D. I was not concerned about making a living, I was concerned, hah!, about pursuing truth.

Yancy: Take us from Bryn Mawr to your decision to do graduate work at Yale. I understand that before Yale you spent time studying at Oxford University. What did you study there and with whom? Were there any significant influences?

Cook: Actually I had written to Harvard and they directed me to Radcliffe, but instead of following through with an application to Radcliffe, I applied instead to Yale and was accepted in 1955, the year I was graduated from Bryn Mawr. Meanwhile I had applied to Oxford and upon acceptance there had written to Yale asking them to hold on to my dossier, that I would reapply in two years, which is what I did. Oxford was very good for me insofar as its educational system emphasized writing essays. You didn't have to go to any lectures if you didn't want to, but you had to write essays every week. It helped me to have such a requirement imposed on me, for I learned to look at articles and books from the standpoint of how they were put together instead of concentrating merely on what they said and what my criticism ought to be. At Oxford I adopted the standard of knowing so well how to write that I would spend 90 to 95 percent of my time reading and reflecting and only 5 to 10 percent writing. I learned, I believe, that theretofore elusive lesson about grace in writing, and in my subsequent career outside academe, I functioned largely as a writer and editor, thanks in part to the experience I had at Oxford.

As for my course of study, I elected to do the undergraduate degree in psychology and philosophy, having been persuaded by my adviser that Oxford thinks more highly of its undergraduate degree than of any other of its degrees. It must be recalled that in the '50s Oxford had not yet widely embraced the German model of doctorate degrees. Most of Oxford's dons or professors had the M.A. degree (which I also have); it used to be that you could not be awarded an M.A., which is honorary, unless you had an Oxford B.A.; I don't know if that is still true. (I remember a row when I was there because the university with great controversy had voted to give an honorary degree to Harry S Truman,

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who not only did not have an Oxford undergraduate degree but had approved the use of the atomic bomb as well.)

I suppose I should mention that I had the wonderful opportunity to study with Peter Strawson, who was one of the leading analytical philosophers in the movement away from the positivist ideology in philosophy. I can remember his challenging my repetition of the Wittgensteinian formula, newly discovered by me, to be sure, that the meaning of a proposition is in its uses, not to be confused with the pragmatist criterion of usefulness.

I will mention also the informal lectures given by John Austin, who introduced me to the ethics side of the analytical school of philosophy. I will never forget the first time I attended one of his sessions (even before I studied with Strawson) along with an overflow of students hanging from the rafters, so to speak. For what seemed like a very long time the issue was debated, Austin taking pro and con, whether the sentence "This is a dumpy teapot" was evaluative or descriptive. I could not believe my ears—accustomed as they were to contemplating only traditional philosophy—especially when it turned out that one had good reasons for accepting either or neither side of the debate. My other tutors were Mary Warnock (now Dame Mary Warnock) and B. A. Farrell, in philosophy of mind. It was Warnock who sent me to Strawson, which itself, I soon learned, was a vote of confidence in my work.

Yancy: What year did you attend Yale and what was it like studying there? And who did you study with while there?

Cook: In 1957 I went to Yale, where I was one of perhaps a handful of women students in the graduate school studying philosophy. Today people tend to forget that Yale was then exclusively a college for men at the undergraduate level; women were visible in the graduate and professional schools but hardly numerous. As a token of their permanence, nonetheless, Yale built a graduate women's dormitory that opened my second year in New Haven. I lived there for one year before agreeing to share an apartment with a Canadian studying for a Ph.D. in English, who is after all these years my best friend. Our other roommate, an American who was graduated from Bryn Mawr two years behind me, and whom I did not know at Bryn Mawr, I have lost touch with. I stayed at Yale for four years, during the last two of which I was a teaching assistant and also managing editor of the *Review of Metaphysics*. In addition, I worked at Yale University Press. Needless

to say, I did not finish my dissertation during those years in New Haven but only later after I had left academe.

I studied with most of the well-known people in philosophy then at Yale, which was, I understand, more eclectic in its faculty appointments than Harvard. Among others, and I mention them in no particular order, were Wilfred Sellars, F. S. C. Northrop, Rulon Wells, John Smith, and Paul Weiss. Of course my association with Paul Weiss has been continuous since 1957, albeit contact in later years was sometimes no more frequent than once a year. Shortly after his mandatory retirement from Yale in 1969 Weiss came to Washington to teach at Catholic University, so I have been able to see him upon occasion ever since, and especially on his birthday. In recent years I take him a cake with candles, which I have promised not to light anymore. I sat in on a summer "course" he led on Plotinus a few years ago and although his advanced age was beginning to show—he was born in 1901—it was still a very stimulating experience, with some sessions unbelievably brilliant.

Probably I have learned more from Paul Weiss than from any other teacher; I observed at close hand his extraordinary industry, his astonishing level of dedication to philosophy as well as to his children, both of whom I got to know in New Haven. One summer when I was at Yale he hired me to type a manuscript; this was before I could type really well, but he tolerated my lack of speed in exchange for faithful adherence to his meticulous editing marks.

Weiss hired me my first year at Yale to be a reader in his undergraduate philosophy of art course. I learned under his tutelage how to grade papers, since by prior agreement he would read all As (in the years before grade inflation there were not many) and Fs (again, not many). He would spot-check the papers with grades in between A and F, and then share with me his reasons for differing from my evaluations, which was very beneficial especially considering the grading system was in numbers not in letters. During two years of being a grader, he never differed with me on the letter equivalent of grades, only occasionally on the numbers. This gave me a sense of confidence since I never had compared any student's work with my own, so I had no idea of the intricacies and relativities of grading systems. And I will always remember his remark that one paper to which I had given a 94 was worth less because the writer had not been sufficiently responsive to criticism from oppositional points of view. This is the type of comment, among others, that I readily took to heart in my own work. When it came to philosophical orientation, however, I was not

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Weiss's disciple, having learned how to separate appreciation for the teacher from the teaching. No doubt the Oxford view of philosophy had made me less than receptive to Weiss's brand of metaphysical speculation. But he helped me understand that when you kick metaphysics out the front door, so to speak, it sneaks in the back. For that reason, I became wary of the attempt to identify the aim of philosophy with an allegedly metaphysically neutral conceptual analysis.

Yancy: What was the direction of your dissertation and who directed it?

Cook: I was always primarily interested in ethics, but my choice of a topic I later realized was misguided in that it put an extraordinary burden on me to try to be fair to a position with which I could not, however much I might have wished otherwise, to agree. I had noticed that people tend to become disciples of whatever philosophy they specialize in. The trouble with that is that you have to choose what you will specialize in before you have had an opportunity to explore equally well all the options. To avoid that trap, I decided to explore an approach that was opposed to my own leanings (toward a Kantian deontology), and as it happens about the time I was looking for a dissertation topic there appeared a new work in ethics by Stephen C. Pepper that caught my attention because of its naturalist presuppositions, diametrically opposed to my own. I then formulated a prospectus based on my reading of that work and perhaps an earlier one, *World Hypotheses*, but I had not looked at Pepper's monumental *Sources of Value* at the time.

I began my dissertation work under Sellars, whose methods I much admired. He helped me to prepare my prospectus, but he left Yale for Pittsburgh before I made any real headway in developing the dissertation, and I also made some changes in my personal situation that resulted in my dissertation's being put off for a few years. In resuming the project under the threat of a deadline I turned to Paul Weiss, and through him, to Rulon Wells, under whom I had studied the history of logic. At the time I finished my dissertation I was working in the State Department in Washington as an analyst for African affairs.

Yancy: What is the genesis of your interest in ethics and value theory?

Cook: I would suspect that it was a spinoff from my early religious orientation. But as well it was a consequence of my refusal to separate philosophy from life itself; hence I cannot interact with other people without reflecting on ethical issues and bringing to bear theoretical

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considerations. I do not compartmentalize what I think I know from what I do or how I behave. For this reason I have always appreciated the enormous variety of my experience, the interaction I have had with people of all sorts of backgrounds, from English aristocracy to Haitian peasants. It has helped to strengthen my conviction regarding the centrality of the moral integrity of the individual. Of course, it is difficult to specify in what that integrity consists. And by no means do I take any one model of integrity to be a fixed target for all human striving. But when push comes to shove, if I may coin an expression, I believe that your moral integrity is all you can have that is inalienable.

As far as value theory is concerned, I look upon it as much broader than an interest in ethics. It includes even branches of logic insofar as logic is interested in what constitutes good argument. Like philosophy itself, value theory requires enormous acquaintance with factual matters, acquaintance with what Descartes referred to as "the book of the world," albeit as a starting point.

Yancy: What were some of your teaching experiences after graduating from Yale?

Cook: Well, I did not graduate from Yale until 1965, if you put it that way. Meanwhile I had taught at Wellesley and worked as an editor in New York and, as I mentioned, had also joined the State Department for what turned out to be a year and a half or so. After leaving State I worked for the now defunct Office of Economic Opportunity and left government in 1966 (returning for four years in 1977) to teach at Howard University in Washington. My teaching at Howard was interrupted by a two-year appointment at Connecticut College, after which I returned to Howard for six more years. It is ironic, I think, that my experiences at a predominantly Black institution would help convince me to abandon the teaching of philosophy for good, as it turns out.

Yancy: As the first Black woman Ph.D. philosopher, how were you received by students and colleagues? Were any of your students/colleagues "shocked" to find a Black woman teaching courses in philosophy?

Cook: I began teaching at Yale in 1959, before affirmative action I might add, and before women's liberation. The presumption was completely in my favor; I had students (all of whom were white; someone told me that Yale had some twenty or so Negroes campus-wide, none of whom was my student) tell me that they wanted to be in my section because they figured that if Yale would appoint me I

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Joyce Mitchell Cook

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- Abigail Fisher

must be really good, even better, than the others. From what I hear,
today the presumption would likely be against me, for there are those
who would think that if Yale (or some other predominantly white insti-
tution) appointed me, it must be because of affirmative action. I must
admit that I looked nothing like the stereotype of a philosopher I
myself had once entertained; so I am more generous than I otherwise
might be when I run into the stereotypes that others entertain. For one
thing I looked extremely young at the time, even younger than my
twenty-five-going-on-twenty-six years of age—an incredible represen-
tative, when you stop to think of it, of the wisdom of the ages!

Yancy: When it occurred to you that you were the first Black woman to
receive the Ph.D. in philosophy in the United States, how did you
understand the gender and racial implications of this?

Cook: It did not occur to me that I was the first Black woman to receive
the Ph.D. in philosophy in the United States or even in the world, as it
has been suggested to me by more than one person. How could such
a thought occur to me—as uninformed as I was at the time in regard
to Black history and indeed, American history? On the contrary, I
believe that it was Eugene Holmes, my onetime senior colleague at
Howard, who first imparted this thought to me. As I recall he men-
tioned that I was the first Black woman to teach in the philosophy
department at Howard, not the first woman, mind you, but the first
Black woman. But he went on to make the broader "first" claim,
which I am not able to substantiate even after studying Black history
for the better part of the present decade. I have seen written references
(in *The New Negro*, for example) to Dr. Anna J. Cooper as having
received a "doctorate in philosophy" from the Sorbonne, but I have
reason to believe this is misleading, a judgment the new Norton
Anthology of African American Literature also challenges by pointing
out that her doctorate was in French.

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James at
Howard
1955

Feminist
black
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A VOICE FROM THE SOUTH

Yancy: Did you ever experience any difficulty in terms of race and gen-
der while teaching?

Cook: That is a hard question because one cannot tell what difficulties
are due to race, or gender for that matter, unless one has a reference
point. I have already alluded to this difficulty in talking about the class
rank problem at the end of my junior high years. This point is also
illustrated in a line I shall adapt from a shaggy dog story: to refuse to
lend someone your toothbrush is not to exhibit racial or gender dis-
crimination against that person. Whoever claims otherwise does not

Have you ever been discriminated against? How do you know if
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degrees have a reference point, in this case, a point that establishes what is reasonable to expect by way of cooperation from others. And so it is, it seems to me, in the context of racial or gender relations, not that the two are the same in every respect. As it happens I was not looking for racial or gender slights and so I may have overlooked some. I believe there was and still is some discrimination of both kinds in white institutions and in Black institutions. I am not sure which is worse: race or gender discrimination, nor am I sure whether such discrimination is worse in white or Black institutions.

While at Howard, I began to reflect on the relation between philosophy and race for the first time, and to appreciate many problems that needed to be addressed before I could make the kind of relevant pronouncements students in the midst of a revolution were seeking. It struck me that nothing short of a totally dedicated effort would suffice to address those problems. I cannot say, however, that I received unmixed departmental encouragement to pursue those interests, and I was unwilling to ignore them by immersing myself in the traditional curriculum I otherwise was committed to teach.

Even now, after working in academic administration for a number of years before embarking on a new career of working for myself, that is, after some years of independence from all academic, institutional restraints on the direction of my professional efforts, I cannot see myself as effectively functioning in any environment in which political considerations predominate over others in my thinking. I am not nor do I aspire to be a political adviser, and I do not accept the notion, in the absence of more cogent argument than I have seen, that I have a responsibility to save the race or humankind or anything of the sort.

As a matter of fact, it is contradictory for me to hold the view that philosophy is context-bound that there are no absolute truths in morals, politics, science, and whatever, moreover that competing interests deserve equal consideration, and then to turn around and hold up my personal convictions as commendable to others on philosophical grounds alone. To be a missionary, after all, one must presume to know the truth—and also know that the intended recipient does not.

Yancy: When did you first begin to give philosophical attention to the Black experience as a more focused aspect of race? And what are some of your reflections on this notion of the so-called Black experience?

Cook: I suppose it was in 1970, when at the friendly insistence of my chairman, I agreed to represent Howard at a conference on philosophy.

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McAllister Director
1968-1976

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to BI Phil
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Changes depend upon context*

It's what white Phil has been doing to BI Phil. A presumed sense of knowledge

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phy and the Black experience at the University of Illinois, Chicago
Circle. In my paper simply and, I might add, presumptuously, entitled
"A Critique of Black Experience," I attempted to explore three
hypotheses regarding Black experience with a view toward under-
standing what it is. For example, I considered and rejected the claims
of Negritude, and I endorsed a modified statement of Franz Fanon that
emphasized feelings of racial inferiority. Of course there are problems
with defining Black experience in negative terms, as critics are quick
to point out. Perhaps only the Black nationalists who discover white
superiority to be the root of racial problems can agree that the attitude
of white superiority in the dominant group fosters the reciprocal feel-
ing among Blacks of inferiority. I am not talking about all Blacks, of
course, but only about those who have not experienced what Charles
Wesley the historian used to refer to as "second emancipation."

My later work in this area continues my interest in the definition of
Black experience, which, to be sure, is not the same as the description
of Black experience. As I see it, it is the task of sciences to describe,
and it is the task of philosophy to analyze, i.e., define. The two are not
entirely separate since Black experience, I believe, is a historical
concept.

Yancy: How would you define Black philosophy? And is there such a
thing? Have you come to think of Black philosophy differently since
your days in academia?

Cook: Black philosophy, according to the American Philosophical
Association, is a recognized subspecialty within the diverse tradition
of American philosophy as a whole. As a practical matter, it has
become what practitioners, mainly Black professors of philosophy,
say it is. It tries to address certain issues that some Black philosophers
regard as central to their interests as philosophers while at the same
time having a bearing on the lives of Black people. Some of its adher-
ents claim that it uses the language, the techniques, and approaches
of analytical philosophy in service of the liberation of Black people.
But without further analysis I am not convinced that we can identify
something as Black (especially Black American) philosophy just
because Black people write it or just because Black people focus their
analytical tools on problems of especial interest to Black people, any-
more than I would be convinced that we can identify a book as a
book on Black logic because the examples of arguments used in the
book call attention to subject matter of interest to Black people.

The authors of a 1974 textbook called *Logic for Black Undergradu-*

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ates make this very point in denying that there is a separate logic for whites and Blacks. "All men are equal. John is a man. Therefore, John is equal," is in the form of the Barbara syllogism, but it does not prove that there is Black logic. Incidentally, this quotation is from a Black graduate student I met back in the '50s who said that she learned this in a logic class at a Black university. As I recall, she seemed not to have heard (or to have quite forgot) the standard version of the argument, "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal." The moral of this anecdote is that as Black philosophers, ourselves the products of cultural pluralism, we have to take care that our statements about Black experience not turn out to be mere paraphrases like "All men are equal."

Now conceivably there could be Black philosophy in some other sense—quite like the sense we deny to the expression "Black logic." That is, we might want to insist that above and beyond the fact that its practitioners are Black, and the issues it pursues are important to Black people, the philosophy itself, understood as a body of results rather than methods, is Black. If such were possible, then Black philosophy would have the status of, say, scholastic philosophy, or perhaps existential philosophy, or more problematically, Greek philosophy. In short, Black philosophy would be a school of philosophy. I doubt such a claim can be sustained about Black philosophy in its present state of development at any rate.

Yancy: Since the time that you were active in academia, do you sense any changes in terms of the direction of Black philosophy?

Cook: I think that philosophers who are Black had not had opportunity to pay sufficient attention to the definition of Black philosophy back in 1976 when I left teaching. This meant, among other things, that we did not know who our audience was. If we attempted to communicate with other Blacks on social issues of the day, we were forced to abandon our professional mode of expression and techniques of analysis in favor of a looser language more suited to a general audience. There was no "universe of discourse" for Black philosophy, and terminological confusion proliferated. It is a problem that I think exists to a much lesser extent today. The volume entitled *The Underclass Question* is a good example of what I mean. In the climate of the mid-1970s as I remember it, the tenor and philosophical professionalism of this collection of essays would not have been possible.

So it seems to me that Black philosophers feel freer now to develop in technical ways their positions on Black-related topics without wor-

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rying about carrying along a general audience, although, in my opin-ion, there is still a price to pay for going against the prevailing per-spective collectively referred to as political correctness. Having gained professional recognition, they now take for granted such basic issues as whether there is or can be a Black philosophical perspective, a question I still think is unsettled after having considered a number of their arguments.

Stop

Yancy: What advice would you have for a young African-American interested in pursuing a career in philosophy?

Cook: I don't know that I should venture to give career advice to anyone, let alone Black philosophy students. The best advice I can think of is to become as financially independent as you can so that you will be free to pursue and express your thoughts without unwelcome interference or without unwelcome consequences of unwelcome interference! I also happen to think that philosophy is a hard taskmaster that requires dedication beyond the call of duty of many other pursuits in terms of breaking new ground. If life is unthinkable without pursuing philosophy, by all means pursue it. Otherwise, do something else. ☺

Yancy: During what period were you managing editor of the *Review of Metaphysics*? What was this experience like?

Cook: It was at Yale, the same year that I was appointed to teach, that I also became managing editor of the *Review*, thanks to Paul Weiss's confidence in my ability. I had worked for him, as I have indicated, and I also had contributed some book reviews to the *Review*, I think. Certainly, I had done minimal work on the *Review* when I was asked to be managing editor. It's a good experience for me to recall in the present debate about affirmative action, because it was brought to my attention by another graduate student that someone else who had worked a lot on the *Review* was more deserving of the appointment than I was. I answered that that was not my concern, that I had asked myself two questions: Was I qualified to do the job and did I want to do it? My answers were both affirmative (I had been editor of my high school newspaper and had occasionally contributed to the college newspaper. I have long felt that I have printer's ink in my blood, another irony in view of the paucity of publications under my signature).

The experience was educational as it was intended to be. For example, I was responsible for investing any surplus funds of the *Review* and in order to make a good recommendation I for the first

time in my life had to consider the stock market. The treasurer of Yale was very supportive in giving me advice. I was also responsible for the quality of the printing, and I am told that the typographical errors were fewer than ever before. So all in all, I think that my selection was well acquitted.

Yancy: How does your identity as a Black woman philosopher mediate your philosophical concerns?

Cook: The fact that I have been absorbed for some eight years now in a project that focuses on Black experience, a project I conceived in the '70s, well before I was in a position to attempt to carry it out, is probably inexplicable if I were not Black. But it would be simplistic, I think, to regard my project as mediating my philosophical concerns, which are broader than Black issues. For example I am interested in cosmology and theories of physics. The problems I have identified in the area of Black philosophy reflect most of my philosophical concerns that are summarized under the heading of value theory, particularly ethics. My identity as a "Black woman philosopher," as you put it, already presupposes some construction on my part. And in giving this reply, I am passing over the gender part of your question, that, at first glance, might well call for a completely different answer. Many people ask me if I teach English, which is compatible with their idea of professions open to women, but no one ever takes me to be a philosopher. I myself have begun only recently to think of myself as a philosopher by way of justifying my interests as being different from the interests of most people I know—of whatever color.

Yancy: What are some of your thoughts on the contemporary debate in the area of critical race theory? Do you see race as a social construct? Would you elaborate?

race in two different contexts

Cook: I think that race is in part, but only in part, a social construct, just as race is in part but only in part an objective (natural) condition. To speak to the first part is to respond to a question about the arbitrary, historical, social relations that have grown up around race, while the second part answers the question of the basis of racial classification. These different questions, indicative of different uses to which the concept of race can legitimately be put, have been confused with disastrous consequences. We sometimes forget, for example, that the earliest occurrence of the word "race" in English comes in 1508, according to Michael Banton, well before the Atlantic slave trade to North America, and that it is used in a religious poem reflect-

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Joyce Mitchell Cook

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ing the Biblical view of Adam as the common ancestor of humankind even as it refers to followers of the sin of envy as "backbiters of sundry races." (If Adam is not the common ancestor, then how came sin into the world of the others?) It seems to me that these two senses of race cannot be reduced to a dichotomy of, on the one hand, a nothing-but-social construct and, on the other, nothing-but-physical characteristics.

Viewed as a social construct, race is a historical concept that changes in its social significance from society to society and from time to time. But as an objective condition (also subject to historical variation), race depends on certain characteristics—never mind these characteristics don't uniquely determine destiny and keeping in mind that they are variable, both diachronically and synchronically. Moreover, as anthropologist Vincent Varich has pointed out, it is easy for any mature-sighted individual of whatever background to sort out on the basis of their racial characteristics alone a combined group of individuals composed of one hundred persons each taken respectively from sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia, these individuals having been divested of all cultural or ethnic clues, such as distinctive clothing. With only a small margin of error, the combined group can be sorted out into the original three groups of one hundred each. All the discussion in the world does not render race in this latter sense an illusion, contrary to what some theorists seem to argue. Theorists seem to accept the Wittgensteinian view that definitions are clustering devices, yet they seem often to get hung up at the boundaries.

In short I regard the effort to ignore race as misguided. The concept of race was supposed to have been consumed in the analogous flames of phlogiston more than a half century ago, thanks to Ashley Montagu's widely acclaimed critique; that reports of its death were premature testifies not only to the testimony of common sense but perhaps also to strong biases in favor of a metaphysical doctrine of natural kinds.

But I see that possibly a lasting value of the current debate may be that racial pride, humankind's potentially most dangerous emotion, when given free rein, will yield ground in the socially motivated process of conserving group differences that, being cultural or ethnic rather than natural, will increasingly place more emphasis on choice rather than biology.

gives power to a person

Yancy: What got you interested in writing on the nature/nurture debate in the area of human intelligence?

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Cook: It was at a time when William Shockley and others were making too much of the disparities between Black and white scores on IQ tests, and a number of Black people of my acquaintance were attempting to refute Shockley by suggesting that since his Nobel prize was not in genetics his arguments should be overlooked. I was teaching logic at the time and, always in search of apt examples, I found this one could be interpreted to demonstrate an informal fallacy. But in truth I was embarrassed that students and even some faculty were hard-pressed to find a better argument against Black intellectual inferiority. So I began to research the topic of IQ tests, about which I had learned something in psychology some years before, and the paper to which you refer was the result.

Yancy: Yes, in that paper you state that "in the absence of further research in the area of measurement of Black intelligence, the IQ controversy will not abate. Driven underground temporarily it is likely to rear its head anew." What are some of your reflections on Richard J. Herrnstein's and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*?

Cook: Well, I am not a prophet but these authors certainly perpetuate a theory of reoccurrence, so to speak. There is a volume of essays, *The Bell Curve Debate*, that I think effectively exposes unfounded assumptions of Herrnstein and Murray. But you know, just as there is an objective condition that roughly defines races while stopping short of determining any objective purpose for racial distinctions, so there is an objective condition (call it what you will; Herrnstein and Murray call it inferiority as measured by the tests) that enables, not the man on the street, but some psychometrists to sort out individuals, again by race, who perform less well than others on IQ tests. However, the difference, or one difference, is that such tests arguably do not possess the predictive power they profess to have. And of course Daniel Goleman and others contend that emotional intelligence is more influential than IQ in determining success in the marketplace.

Yancy: In terms of the major philosophers of the past, who has influenced you most?

Cook: I suppose it's a toss-up between Kant and Plato. I would add Kierkegaard also but I am not convinced that he is a major philosopher although he certainly is a major theologian, whom I like to quote at times at the risk of being thought to agree with his major premises (I do not). Of all the existentialists, I noticed that my Black students were very sympathetic to Kierkegaard. It was as if they interpreted his

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emphasis on subjectivity as truth in opposition, not to scientific truth, which is what Kierkegaard intended, but to the truth of the white man. I have to admit that some analogies are striking. For my own part, I owe it to Kierkegaard to have reminded me of the importance of the claims of existence over the claims of theory. It was he who remarked that philosophers build castles but live in shacks nearby. To me this is an admonishment to put your life where your mouth is. Of course, Socrates would agree, and I suppose the latter's insistence on examining one's life is ground for regarding him as the first existentialist in Western philosophy.

Yancy: Talk about your nonacademic work experience in the State Department and how this experience helped, as I believe you have suggested, to illuminate the task of philosophy?

Cook: Philosophers today, as always, debate what philosophy is, but I cannot agree with the postmodernist view that philosophy has no special task and therefore should merge with other disciplines, in effect, disappear as a separate discipline. It is easy enough to understand some of the thinking that leads to that position, considering how difficult it is for philosophers to survey, let alone master, the vast bodies of knowledge some acquaintance with which is not only desirable but necessary in order to support the notion of philosophical relevance to practical affairs. But being difficult and being impossible are two different things. There are many difficulties in my own conception of philosophy which tends to draw, among other nonphilosophical sources, upon a model I saw in action when I worked in the State Department.

At my level as an analyst covering the affairs of a few Black African countries, I periodically assumed briefing duty which required me, having been alerted to possible breaking news by my counterparts, to read overnight cables from all the posts in Black Africa at six a.m. in the morning and then brief the assistant secretary on important developments at, say, eight (who, along with the five other assistant secretaries representing other parts of the world, would brief the secretary at nine, who would brief the president at ten). (I am not confident of the exact times.) Along with the secretary of state at the president's briefing might be individuals who headed other agencies also concerned with aspects of the countries in question.

Now this model, not a theoretical model but a working model, I should emphasize, is also widely used in the corporate world. The person at the top makes the hard decisions based on information gath-

ered and evaluated at lower levels. No doubt the persons at lower levels may have greater knowledge and depth in their particular areas than the persons up the line, while the persons up the line presumably have broader knowledge. In this real world of which I speak, decisions are made, after this fashion. For example, a decision is made about some matter in Africa but not without considering its likely impact in Europe, and vice versa. The same person who specializes in Europe does not also specialize in Africa, and so on. What seems to be the greatest objection to such a model for philosophy in relation to other disciplines has been not the question of whether or how well it can work, *mutatis mutandis*, but whether philosophy has any right to dictate to other disciplines. I am puzzled by this objection, since it would seem to me to be warranted only if we press the paradigm too far thus reaching the conclusion that philosophy in turn would issue directives concerning how and what is to be done in the other disciplines. But on the contrary it seems to me that the critical question ought to be whether philosophers can comprehend certain results (and problematics) of these other disciplines and interrelate them any better than the specialists in these other disciplines can comprehend the philosophical implications of their results (and problematics) and interrelate them. For my money, the jury is still out on this one.

When it comes to postmodernist views toward the theory of knowledge—if I may be permitted to leap—they demolish castles but live in the debris that falls out. On the one hand, they liberate knowledge from the foundational criteria that have driven modern Western philosophy; but when it comes to philosophy itself, they hold it to the standards of knowledge they themselves have proscribed.

In other words, it is only under the criteria of knowledge that they themselves discredit that the activity of philosophizing itself should be banished from the collective domain of intellectual inquiry. Under less privileged criteria, philosophy would have full rein to try to illuminate relations between key concepts that hypothetically characterize kinds of reality. In this connection, and at the risk of being another footnote to Plato, I think it would profit philosophers to resuscitate the original meaning of philosophy, i.e., the love of wisdom, not love of knowledge, mind you. Of course it will turn out, I also think, that wisdom is most severely tested in the uses it makes of knowledge.

Yancy: As the first Black woman philosopher to receive the Ph.D. in philosophy in the United States, who is Joyce Mitchell Cook?

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doubt the persons at lower levels in their particular areas. Persons up the line presumably of which I speak, decide, for example, a decision is made without considering its likely impact on the person who specializes in it, and so on. What seems to me for philosophy in relation to the question of whether or how well it as philosophy has any right to stand by this objection, since it is if we press the paradigm too far. Philosophy in turn would issue a decision to be done in the other disciplines. The critical question is to comprehend certain results and interrelate them in any disciplines can comprehend results (and problematics) and it is still out on this one.

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her to receive the Ph.D. in Joyce Mitchell Cook? description since I have not

researched the question of who is the first Black woman philosopher, etc. But Joyce Mitchell Cook is, for better or worse, currently trying to understand (note not "know" but "understand") certain problems pertaining to Black experience that require her to study what a great many people have to say in a number of fields before she puts together a picture of the world as she sees it, a picture based on her own atypical experience as well as on reflection with due consideration, it is hoped, to what others have thought as well. Those enriched experiences, coupled with what she, rather I, recognize to be philosophical virtues, make me very wary of many of the claims I refer to collectively as Black romanticism—the project of venerating an African past that is not demonstrably one's own past, while at the same time refusing to come to terms with the ever-changing present and beyond. As I have indicated, I am suspicious of claims to bolster racial pride at whatever cost, including the sacrifice of sound scholarship. For one thing it overemphasizes the importance of the remote past in the motivational system of present-day Blacks. There is ample evidence, I think, that many Black Americans, no less than white Americans, aspire to goals that were impossible for their forebears to conceive, let alone attain. Each example of this—each Black "first" as well as subsequent pathfinders—confutes the claim that one must have racial pride in order to achieve if, indeed, racial pride is not identical to self-respect.

Almost a half century ago, Black American philosopher William Fontaine wrote that Black intellectuals were predisposed to be environmentalists in the debate between nature and nurture. But long before the lines of the debate were being drawn up in terms of IQ tests, in a point of view usually attributed to the father of behaviorism (American John B. Watson), two of the cofounders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, cast their vote in favor of environmentalism, and their view of the matter, stated in language that is remarkable in its anticipation of Watson's "give me ten healthy young infants, and I'll turn out adults of what profession you choose" was published in 1794! Fully to appreciate environmentalism, it seems to me, is to be liberated from the necessity of claiming Beethoven (I choose one of many examples) to be Black in the absence of reliable evidence simply, it would appear, for the purpose of enhancing self-respect. *need to enhance to*

Today it is not so much environmentalists as Black vindicationists with their fixation, one might say, on Black history that are driving trends in Black philosophy, to which support is given, for example, by

Lucius T. Outlaw's recent efforts to conserve and develop Black differences in what may be described as a resuscitation of W. E. B. Du Bois's turn-of-the-century view embracing the idea of a race spirit and always being careful, of course, to distinguish "racialism" from "racism." Black vindicationists are also responsible for the drive to discredit the alleged foundations of Western philosophy in Greece. Some Black philosophers have joined these endeavors, despite the specialist knowledge required to decide the factual issues, granted a paucity of evidence. In their defense I might add that my reading of *Not Out of Africa*, classicist Mary Lefkowitz's recent addition to the controversy, tells me that it takes more than classical knowledge to commandeer superior arguments against the vindicationists, just as it takes more than superior logic to establish the facts of the case put forward by the classicists.

I have a rule of thumb: If any particular conclusion is favorable to my case (my hypothesis, my race, etc.), it needs at least one more review, and perhaps the evidence of another book or two, before I can be satisfied that I have done justice to all the facts. At some point, however, I recognize that one has to take the dilemmas (or paradoxes or ironies) by the horns.

Yancy: What are some of your future directions in terms of your philosophical work?

Cook: Well, I hope to dig myself out of the mound of note cards and other memorabilia I have collected during my prolonged journey to understand and become immersed, I almost said "mired," in the concept of Black experience long enough to finish writing a book in progress. Not surprisingly, after six or seven years of research I have material for many books, and I hope in the future to follow through on some of them, not to forget an autobiographical account I started in the summer of 1969 under the onslaught of the Black revolution in an effort to convince myself that I knew who I was. Regrettably the press of other commitments made me abandon the narrative at the point I was entering college. But I am very grateful to have covered the early period at that time, and I look forward to allowing myself a peek at it when I shall have opportunity to carry it forward.

Public Lectures and Published Works of Joyce Mitchell Cook

- "The Nature and Nurture of Intelligence," *The Philosophical Forum* (Boston University, January 1979).
- "Black Scholars in Philosophy," a panel of Black philosophers in a radio broadcast sponsored by the Johnson Foundation (Wisconsin, February 1976).
- "The Concept of Black Experience" (address to the American Philosophical Association, Western Division meeting in Chicago, April 1975).
- The Search for Personal Identity* (address delivered at convocation, Tuskegee Institute); published by Tuskegee Institute, November 1974.
- "The Concept of Black Experience" (address delivered in December 1974 presenting an overview of book project inspired by work initiated in November 1970 paper listed below).
- "Prolegomena to a Black Philosophy" (address presented at Springhill College, Mobile, Alabama, December 1974).
- "The Nature and Nurture of Intelligence" (address delivered at Tuskegee Institute, April 1973).
- "Classical Theories of Knowledge" (a series of eight lectures presented to teachers of philosophy in the Summer Program sponsored by the Institute for Services to Education, July 1973). These lectures took place in Chestnut Hill, MA.
- "The Examined life," *Bryn Mawr College Alumnae Bulletin* (October 1973).
- "A Critique of Black Experience" (address delivered at the Conference on Philosophy and the Black Experience, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, November 1970).

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