3 Three pillars of African-American philosophy

Our discussion of nineteenth-century Africana philosophy has been, in effect, a discussion of the foundations of African-American philosophy. African-American philosophy is an area of Africana philosophy that focuses on philosophical problems posed by the African diaspora in the New World. Although there is some controversy over the term "African American" to refer specifically to the convergence of black people in the New World continents and regions of the modern world, let us use that term since it is the one most used by philosophers in the field.[1] Thus by African-American philosophy let us then mean the modern philosophical discourse that emerges from that diasporic African community, including its francophone, hispanophone, and lusophone forms. To articulate the central features and themes of the thought from that intellectual heritage, I would like to begin by outlining some of the thought of the three greatest influences on many (if not most) in the field – namely, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frantz Fanon.

Anna Julia Cooper and the problem of value

The life of Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) defies belief.[2] She was born a slave, from her father and master George Washington Hayward and his slave, her

[1] This is an issue I have discussed in a variety of forums. For now, the reader is encouraged to consult the discussions of these terms that emerge in part I of *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006). See also Frank Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," *The Philosophical Forum* 24, nos. 1–3 (1992–3): 136–65 and Corey D. B. Walker, "Modernity in Black: Du Bois and the (Re)Construction of Black Identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*," *Philosophia Africana* 7, no. 1 (2004): 83–95.

[2] The biographical section of this summary is informed by Charles Lemert, "Anna Julia Cooper: The Colored Woman's Office," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, Including "A Voice*

mother, Hannah Stanley Hayward, in Raleigh, North Carolina and went to school shortly after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which outlawed slavery except for inmates. She was still a child during these events, but took so well to her studies at St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute for Free Blacks that she was teaching mathematics to high school students before reaching the age of puberty. Education became her profession for the rest of her life. She was briefly married around the age of nineteen (her exact age was uncertain because of the absence of a birth certificate) to George Cooper, and marriage unfortunately required her to cease teaching, but George Cooper died within two years of the marriage. Cooper never remarried but resumed teaching. She adopted several children throughout the course of her long life, five of whom were the children of her half brother. She spent most of her life in Washington, DC, where, after achieving her bachelor's and master of arts degree from Oberlin College in 1887, she taught at the M Street High School, which became the Laurence Dunbar School for Negroes and Native Americans. She defied convention there by providing the students with an education in the humanities and sciences, which prepared them to go on for liberal arts degrees at some of the nation's most competitive colleges and universities. The general position, advocated by Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), founder of the Tuskegee Institute, was that black youths should receive vocational training. Cooper was outspoken in her rejection of this view, and it soon led to her being attacked by the infamous "Tuskegee machine" of Washington supporters. She was maligned in the DC papers supportive of Washington, which accused her of sexual indiscretion with one of her adopted children. The result was her being fired (non-renewal of her contract) from her post of principal of the school in 1906.

Cooper's response was to teach college courses at Lincoln University in Missouri. She resumed her principalship at the M Street High School in 1912 until her retirement in 1930. In 1915 she commenced part-time graduate study in Romance languages at Columbia University, but had to leave the

from the South" and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 1–43, and Cooper's autobiographical reflections from *A Voice from the South*. Cooper's doctoral dissertation was translated and edited by Frances Richardson Keller as *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists. L'Attitude de la France a l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la Révolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

program because of its one-year residency requirement in New York City, which she could not fulfil because of her parental and teaching duties. She resumed her doctoral studies a decade later at the Sorbonne, which she was able to do while working in the United States since that institution did not have a residency requirement, and earned her doctorate in comparative literature by writing a thesis on the Haitian Revolution entitled "L'Attitude de la France a l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la Révolution."

Cooper did not make much of her activist work, but she is perhaps most known in that arena as one of the organizers of the first Pan-African Congress, which took place in 1901 in London, and for her feminist writing and her work in education. She is without question the most sophisticated thinker on what is known today as black feminist thought from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Yet, in spite of her achievements, Cooper's intellectual influence emerges more from the last quarter of the twentieth century onward. Thus, although the first forty years of her life were spent in the nineteenth century, her ideas belong more to the debates of the twentieth and twenty-first. African-American philosophy also came to the fore as an area of inquiry in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and so did the set of questions to which Cooper's thought became more relevant than in her own times.

Cooper's most influential work is her book *A Voice from the South*.[3] In that work she articulated the argument that continues to resonate in much black feminist thought, namely, that black women must become agents of their own future, and that much of the health of their community rests on their shoulders because of the burdens they are forced to carry. This argument is advanced through her theory of worth, which she issues in response to racist arguments against the value of black people. The antiblack racist argument is that the absence of black contribution to civilization suggests that humankind could do well without black people. Cooper's response was that worth was a function of what an individual produced in relation to that which was invested in him or her. She pointed out that very little was invested in blacks, and even less in black women. Yet what blacks have produced is enormous. There is not only the slave labor used to build much of the Americas, but also the innovations and strides of black communities under enormously handicapped conditions. By contrast, the amount

[3] See Lemert and Bhan, *Anna Julia Cooper*, pp. 51–196.

invested, socially and economically, in the production of whites, especially white men, for their achievements is so costly that it diminishes their overall worth. Although some achieve much more than was invested in them, more consume than produce. This argument, from her essay "What Are We Worth?"[4] enabled her to advance the importance of a black feminist agenda through the claim that, internal to black communities, much more was invested in black men than black women, but that black women produced more in relation to such investments than did black men because of being laborers who also bore children. In effect, she formulated an efficiency theory of human worth. The effects of this theory can be seen today in much black feminist thought, especially the womanist forms, although, unlike Cooper, many of the contemporary theorists have substituted "most oppressed" in the formulation.[5] Cooper, like Marx, was in fact working with a model of alienation that did not require the category of oppression, although subjugation and correlates with slavery were hallmarks of their thought.

Cooper's contributions in education also related to her efficiency theory of value. She saw how her students were able to perform with an education in the humanities and sciences. The exclusion of such students from the wider communities of learning meant that those who were ultimately less valuable were given the opportunity to contribute. For her this meant that the overall potential of education was, in effect, being lowered by racism since genuine competition was being handicapped. One could think of her argument in terms of sports. In the past blacks were kept from competing with whites in sports. The claim was that they were not capable of such competition. Today, it has become more difficult to imagine the reverse: white athletes who can genuinely compete with black ones. Cooper's argument is that a similar phenomenon awaits all aspects of social life; the limitations on performance are more artificial, and one does not really know what communities can contribute unless they have the opportunity to do so.

Cooper's argument has within it an element found in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche, worth and health are intimately

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 161–87.

[5] See e.g. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

related. A healthy individual or community is one that can best handle adversity. Thus, the argument goes, those who are benefiting from an absence of adversity are in fact less healthy than those who have had the experience of overcoming it. We see here a return of the conclusion from Alexander Crummell, that blacks have a reason more for pride than shame in their history, for they are truly a community that has been tested and have been not only able to survive, but also to make contributions of their own to humankind.

W. E. B. Du Bois and the problem of double consciousness

Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) is known among Africana academics as the "dean of African-American scholars." He is the best known and most written about Africana thinker. He wrote three autobiographies, scores of books, and subsequent biographies and studies have been written on him, many of which have been more obsessed with placing him under the rubric of either a major European thinker or an American and European social movement.[6] Du Bois, however, was a pioneer whose innovations actually placed him in a class by himself. He studied philosophy while an undergraduate at Harvard University and, although a gifted student, was discouraged by the independently

[6] See e.g. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1993); *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 2000); David Levering Lewis (ed.), *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1995); Daniel Agbeyebiawo, *The Life and Works of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Accra: Stephil Print, 1998); Samuel W. Allen, *A Personal Interview of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Boston: Boston University, 1971); William L. Andrews, *Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985); Herbert Aptheker, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle against Racism in the World* (New York: United Nations, 1983); Bernard W. Bell and Emily Grosholz (eds.), *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Joseph P. DeMarco, *The Social Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983); Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990); and Adolph Reed, Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). And this is only to name a few. In 2000, *The Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science* devoted its March issue of volume 56 to a reprint of and collection of critical essays on his article "The Study of Negro Problems." See also Luc Ngowet's *Phénoménologie de la liberté. Introduction à l'ontologie de W. E. B. Du Bois* (Paris: forthcoming). All this is just a fragment of the work on Du Bois and his thought.