Stephen Ferguson II and John McClendon III: African-American Philosophy and Ethics

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[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Golden Grass]

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.

In collections of philosophical texts and ideas, editors have historically left out contributions from Black thinkers. My guests today, Stephen Ferguson II and John McClendon III, recover the work of important African American philosophers.

Stephen Ferguson II, guest: When we started working on our project, what we noticed as a tendency was that a lot of people who were trying to do African American philosophy assumed that there was no strong tradition of black professional philosophers. And so, what we wanted to do was to highlight the significance of these black professional philosophers, not to say that they were better than, or more important than the nonprofessional philosophers, but to highlight that tradition. And I think in the long term, is doing this kind of archival research is foundational for canon reformation within philosophy.

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

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Christiane: John McClendon III and Stephen Ferguson II are like philosophical archaeologists, uncovering and analyzing the lost scholarship of Black thinkers from the last two centuries. Their book, *African American Philosophers and Philosophy*, is a fascinating exploration of the work of Black scholars who've historically been left out of mainstream philosophy. In my interview with them, we spoke about the value of recovering this scholarship from the archives, and also focused on important contributions to the field of ethics from African-American philosophers.

[interview begins]

Christiane: With me today are the authors of African American Philosophers and Philosophy, Professors John McClendon III.

John McClendon, III, guest: Thank you.

Christiane: And Stephen C. Ferguson II.

Stephen Ferguson: Thank you for having us.

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Christiane: So, you write in your introduction to this book that the future of African American philosophy depends on recovering past African American philosophers. So, what are some of the things that happen when you're engaged in that recovery process?

Stephen Ferguson II: A good part of it, believe it or not, has been for about the last 30 years of archival research. And so, fortunately, both John and I have done an extensive amount of work in African American studies, and we use that kind of background to build off of our interests in African American philosophers. If you look at other fields like history, psychology, there have been a number of works, primarily in the 1970s, on black pioneers in psychology, history, sociology. If you think about philosophy as a discipline, philosophy as a discipline tends to be more conceptual, rather than empirical in nature. And so, in a lot of ways, that lends itself to a kind of tendency to kind of ignore what we call footnotes to history, black professional philosophers, but also black nonprofessional philosophers.

Unfortunately, when we started working on our project, what we noticed as a tendency was that a lot of people who were trying to do African American philosophy assumed that there was no strong tradition of black professional philosophers. And so, what we wanted to do was to highlight the significance of these black professional philosophers, not to say that they were better than, or more important than the nonprofessional philosophers, but to highlight that tradition. And I think in the long term, what we see is this is foundational, doing this kind of archival research is foundational for canon reformation within philosophy.

So, Charles Mills has become a kind of canonical figure in African American philosophy, and in philosophy departments and political science departments. Unfortunately, there's a lot of people who don't know about other black philosophers that use contract theory to understand and talk about race, affirmative action, and other social and political issues.

John McClendon III: The problem of presentism, where, to look beyond the present to the past, is a problem endemic to the discipline, but more specifically with respect to African American philosophers. There's a sense of marginalizing African American philosophical tradition, singularly to the philosophy of race, and thus, you have an impartial myopic conception of what that means. So, we'd like to emphasize three things that become important with regard to your question: discovery, recovery, and reconstruction.

And so, the discovery part speaks to what Dr. Ferguson is saying about the archival work. You have to get your hands dirty, you have to dig to understand then how do you measure the significance of a contribution, in light of the fact that the mainstream canon has made certain presumptions about what is important in philosophy, and what should be taught in philosophy? And as such then, completely ignore what is a very vital part of the philosophical profession, as well as those who are nonprofessional philosophers, and that becomes particularly important on two accounts.

One, those who were not afforded the opportunity to pursue philosophical work in the academy, and here, we point out the problem of academic racism. And then we link that issue to the broader question of marginalization, such that that early discussion that we have dealing with Francis Williams, and how then Hume responds by marginalizing Williams to a footnote. So, what we did is a little refinement, and what I do in teaching, I ask my students, first of all, "Who's David Hume?" And then we go through a discussion about Hume was a skeptic who relied on using empiricism as his particular approach to philosophy, and then we emphasize that the hallmark of empiricism is of course then empirical verification of the facts.

Then we say, "Well, what was Hume's notions respecting the facts surrounding people of African descent and their intellectual capacity?" And there they discover he made a presumption about them, but he never did any factual investigation to confirm his belief that African people were not capable of doing philosophy, they lacked the intellectual substance to engage in high levels of thought. In Hume's remarks, what we find is that that footnote does not make a reference to the precise incident and person under discussion. So, what we did, was the first footnote, if you look at the first footnote, the first footnote is to Francis Williams, the very person that Hume is talking about. So, when we talk about footnotes to history, then I ask students, "Well, what did the first footnote say?" And of course, they didn't take the time to look at that first footnote, and then when they look at the first footnote, I say, "Can you see then the importance of this method of presentation?" To amplify the point about footnotes to history and the marginalization of people of African descent?

Christiane: Yeah. And so, what's always frustrated me, I'm not a philosopher, and I didn't actually study philosophy as an undergraduate, but something that's always frustrated me about philosophy is this insistence on universalism. So, to me, I'm thinking, "Well, if it's universal, why aren't there more people of color who are philosophers in the canon? Why aren't there more women? Why isn't there more representation in the canon?" So, what I appreciated about your book was that you talk a lot about the truth of particularity. So, what is that, and how does that relate to how we talk about African American philosophy?

John McClendon III: We critique conceptions of universality. First, at the level of the false universal, where the presumption is that the particularity of Western philosophy encompasses the universality of philosophy. So, we point out that that is a false universal, that is not the case, that philosophy is the history of Western philosophy. So, we make that a concern of research and discussion. Secondly, there is the notion of the abstract universal. Now, the abstract universal is the presumption that universality is mutually exclusive of particularity, and so, rather than understand the dialectical relationship between universality and particularity, and therefore say that the particular is an instantiation of the universal, most have presumed them to be mutually exclusive. So, philosophy is either universal, or it's particular, rather than to understand that they are, in fact, dialectically linked, such that a concrete universal is what is the task ahead of us in philosophy, and to understand the concrete universal, you have to understand how it is constituted in a variety of particularities, of which then the African American philosophical tradition is what we focus on.

When we think about the universal, if we say "All something is such and such," you know, in the classic syllogism, "All men are mortal," Socrates is a man, therefore, Socrates is mortal. Well, that's a very good example of universality and particularity, because Socrates' presence as a particularity is an instance of that universal, and hence, we could reach the conclusion that he is mortal because he's a human being, and likewise, human beings are made up of individuals such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others such as Charles Leander Hill, Thomas Nelson Baker, and Angela Davis.

And so, what I try to get the students to see then, if you want to have a comprehensive understanding of the universal, you cannot have these two categories, universality and particularity, as mutually exclusive, and this has been one of the failures of professional philosophy, to make the presumption that particularity is actually nullified by universality, rather than enriched by the particular instances to make up the concrete universal.

Christiane: You just mentioned Aristotle and Socrates, so let's talk about Greek philosophy for a little bit. What's noteworthy about the African American philosopher's notion of freedom and free will, versus what a student might uncover if they're doing some reading in Ancient Greek philosophy, and how are those things kind of in tension?

John McClendon III: Among the African American philosophical tradition, given the context of enslavement and fighting against white supremacy, freedom has always been at the centerpiece of the work of African American philosophers. So, we point out that that is the basis for the preeminent tradition called dialectical idealism, and then we explain that dialectical idealism is a philosophical perspective that says that certain immaterial factors, such as the mind, or soul, or consciousness, is at center of motion, change, and development.

So, we take, for example, J.C. Price, a very important African American philosopher, who was in North Carolina and established a historically black institution, Livingstone College, in the 19th century, and he wrote a very important piece, and it actually takes us back to our discussion about discovery, because I discovered J.C. Price's very important article, “The Value of Soul,” in an African-American encyclopedia that was published in 1895. I didn't find that in any scholarly journal, I found it in the very important resources of the African American community.

And in this piece, J.C. Price argues, using the notion of the law of value, which is directly from classical political economy, that all things have value, but certain things have greater value than others, and hence, the soul is what measures then the value of human beings. And in as much as human beings have souls and African Americans have souls, then it is not the bodily characteristics, such as racial characteristics, which becomes then the substance in which we understand the value of African American humanity, but rather, the soul. And so, this tradition then understands this process of progress, as a matter of beginning with an immaterial source.

Following that, we look at particularly the critique offered by Angela Davis and Charles Leander Hill, who then comment on concepts of freedom, and Angela Davis specifically addresses the

question of the history of the United States and its conception of democracy, and points out that just as we find in ancient Greek philosophy the contradiction between the notion of demos, we also found that it was founded upon enslavement. So, you have a contradiction here. If you're talking about a democratic society, but yet, you have slavery, how do those two things come together?

So, we point out then that the early thinkers in the United States, including people like Thomas Jefferson, drew upon the work of Plato and Aristotle. So, the idea then of peoplehood was established on the notion that by nature, certain people were superior to other people. In Aristotle's account, it was not a matter of race, but it was a matter of gender, because he said women were, by nature, inferior. He also argues in his justification of slavery, that some people, by nature, should be enslaved.

What we point out is that with respect to a person like Thomas Jefferson, taking that particular position, that certain people, by nature, are slaves, what Jefferson does is to say then, "By nature of being African, by nature of being black, then black people should be enslaved." And so, then what we see, there is a direct influence.

What Angela Davis points out, and very profoundly so, I think, is that black people always had an inherent response and resistance to their enslavement, and therefore, for them, the notion of freedom was an integral part of the shaping of African American culture. And so, therefore, the exercise of free will would stand opposed to such things as mechanistic materialism, where one is viewed merely as a part in a great machine. Instead, dialectical materialism is what then becomes that basis of standing outside of those material realities, and looking at alternatives to the status quo. We point that out, but what she points out then is that the slave's attempt at freedom has to be seen as an affirmation of their humanity. So, where the dominant ideology sees them as subhuman, Angela Davis profoundly points out that African Americans, in their fight for freedom, and we say in their embrace of dialectical idealism, reaffirms their humanity.

So, what we do then is to say to the students, "No, we should not reject Western philosophy." It's important to read and study Plato, and Socrates, and Aristotle. We discuss all those people, by way of the works of African American philosophers. So, they come to know John Milton Smith, for example, who was a Plato scholar, and by studying them, we can offer them not a mere rejection, but a critical reflection on Western philosophical tradition.

Christiane: I want to turn to focus on ethics. Obviously, this is Examining Ethics, and you write that most black philosophy is actually about ethics, or that a lot of black philosophy tends to be about ethics, values, and morality. Really briefly, why do you think that's the case?

John McClendon III: Yeah, the material conditions that give rise to that, of course, is in light of this dialectical idealist tradition is the dichotomy between the ideal and the material reality. And so, the prescriptive is aligned with the ideal, right? We ought to do such and such, well in fact, the reality is we live in another manner. Let's take Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, is an example of utilizing that particular approach. So, the ideal is what we strive for, in light of

the realities that fail to fulfill the ideal. And so, in that respect then, many African American philosophers are elaborating on this contradiction between the ideal and the material reality of white supremacy, the material reality of institutionalized racism, the material reality of violence and terrorism, the material reality of how slavery and its legacy continues to be a point of departure, rather than realizing the ideals, which have been framed in such things as the Declaration of Independence, or what later was reformed in terms of the Constitution.

So, that ethical concern becomes preeminent in philosophical reflection, and it's understandable when you reflect upon those material realities and see a certain ideal as being subverted by the continual realities of the things that I mentioned, such as white supremacy and racism. It becomes even apparent today when we think about Black Lives Matter. If we raise the question and say, "Do black lives matter?" We can answer that in two ways, and be correct in the answer. We can say yes, and we can say no. We can say yes, if we think in terms of the prescriptive ideal. Yes, black lives matter as a prescriptive ideal. No, they do not matter when we see police murdering people on the street.

And so, the question is then, is there an ethical dimension to such actions? How do we respond to that? So, many philosophers have pointed out then that the ideal that black lives matter has not been met in the material realities, and this is why it has to be articulated, black lives matter. And so, when we see these kinds of issues, we have to understand that there can be a philosophical assessment that helps us in a practical way. And so, for the tradition of many African American philosophers, their embrace of ethics was not isolated from their understanding of how philosophy could be engaged as a theoretical guide to practical action.

So, most African American philosophers were not caught in the snag of ivory-towerism, and they saw the need for showing how philosophy could direct us in terms of the practical struggle. So, in part, this emphasis on the ethical is derivative of the dialectical idealist tradition, and why then so many African American philosophers have embraced ethics.

Christiane: I'm fascinated to know what brought you both to this work, and what brought the two of you together to do this work?

Stephen Ferguson II: Well, interestingly enough. I was a student of John McClendon's in undergraduate, when we were at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and as we often joked, I was an avid reader by the time I got to college, but I didn't have a lot of direction in terms of that. So I actually got a work study job at the Black Culture Center where John was the director, and it kind of took off from there in terms of interest. I was already inching towards majoring in philosophy, but I was also doing stuff in history, and as you can tell from the discussion here, John has an awareness of all of those kind of issues in those fields.

So, it was kind of a natural marriage, if you will, intellectually. We often joke about our relationship is similar to Marx and Engels in that respect, [John McClendon III softly laughs] but in a lot of ways, I picked up on a kind of tradition, if you will, that John had already started. I remember one of my first tenure track jobs was at North Carolina A&T. And I was saying it both

as a badge of honor, but also, interestingly enough, out of a sense of ignorance, because I didn't really know the tradition, but I assumed, because they didn't have a philosophy department, that I was the first.

And I had a very good friend of mine who was a black historian, pull me aside one day when he overheard me talking about being the first black philosopher, and he mentioned this guy, Wayman McLaughlin, and I said, "I never heard of this guy," and there was a side of me going, "Man. He probably wasn't that important." And quite interestingly, once I still started doing the archival research, because there wasn't a lot of documentation at North Carolina A&T, what I discovered is that McLaughlin was in graduate school with Martin Luther King at the very same time, and they actually formed a graduate philosophy club called The Dialectical Society, and they pulled to gather these mainly black students, but also some non-white students to talk about philosophical issues.

What really hit home for me is that as I began to do the archival research, was that of all the institutions that McLaughlin had been at, none of them had kept a record of McLaughlin at all, and in fact, most of the archival research I was able to recover was based on the extensive amount of research that had been done on Martin Luther King. So, even his transcript was relatively hard to come by. In fact, it's kind of interesting, I had to send the transcript that I found at North Carolina A&T to Boston, [John McClendon III softly laughs] and have them verify that he actually had went to school there.

So, for me, it was those kind of experiences that pulled together kind of the content, as I pointed out at the beginning, we've been working and reconstructing this stuff for the last 30 to 40 years. And so, this is in many ways, the first step towards another project that we're working on, actually, two other projects that kind of pull together all of the archival research that we've been able to do over the last 30 years. And the other side to it is that if you really put it in perspective, and this is where we're quite critical of the APA, there's not enough monetary support for this type of archival research that is the foundation for rebuilding the canon of what we traditionally think of when we talk about philosophy.

John McClendon III: Well, for me, he's already laid out how we met, and I happily say that he is the very best student I've been ever had. What brought me to philosophy was my activism. So, what that meant then for me, I took a different route, because I saw philosophy as an instrument of struggle, as a way of guiding me and the work that I was doing, and the most substantive philosophical piece that I initially read was by Kwame Nkrumah, and his book *Consciencism*, he said something there that was so important, and he says, "Practice without thought is blind, and thought without practice is empty," and that hit me. I said, "Yes, you're out here doing things, but what direction are you headed in? How do you know?" And so, then I found philosophy, rather than being this abstract something which is removed from the world, is very much a part of understanding the world that we seek to change, and from there, I began to read Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, and V.I. Lenin, and other revolutionary philosophers.

How I came to African American philosophers precedes that, however, and it comes from my childhood. My father attended Wilberforce University in the 1950s, and the president of Wilberforce University was the philosopher, Charles Leander Hill, and Dr. Hill was the second African American to earn a Doctorate in Philosophy from Ohio State University. And so, as a kid, my dad had all these stories about Dr. Hill, I was fascinated by Dr. Hill. And so, I spent a number of years in the Wilberforce archives, going through Dr. Hill's papers and developing an understanding.

That work around Dr. Hill, later on when I reflected on it, told me something very important, and namely that within the context of the African American experience, one is introduced to great possibilities, if you're capable of developing the analytical sharpness to dig and understand what it is that you're a part of. And so, philosophy, for me, became then the self-understanding that provided an instrument for my social activism. And so, my work characterizes that I don't write for the academy, I write for the struggle. And so, when you keep that in mind, then philosophy will always live, because it provides a means at every step in the struggle.

So, a recent piece that I developed on Black Lives Matter that just came out, takes up Black Lives Matter and the generational question that Stephen and I have called it the "intergenerational relay race," and that's how we see the struggle. It's a protracted struggle, where one baton is handed to the next. So, I hand it to him, he's handing it, and I'm handing it to my children, my grandchildren, my nieces and nephews, my students, who then continue on. And so, that's how we have to look at struggle, and when we think of it in terms of ethics, I would say that one has the moral responsibility to provide for the next generation, whatever insights and wisdom that they have been able to develop.

And it's extremely important in today's world, because what we see, given the rise of the social media culture that many of our young people are immersed in, is that many of them think that knowledge is tantamount to having a bunch of information from social media. So, I would end by saying this: A drop of information does not constitute a river of knowledge, nor is it the ocean of wisdom. And what is philosophy? The love of wisdom. [Stephen Ferguson II laughs]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Pintle, 1 Min]

Christiane: If you want to know more about our guest's other work, or some of the things we mentioned in today's episode, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org.

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