

## "I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



Anthony Neal is Associate Professor of Philosophy and a Faculty Fellow in the Shackouls Honors College at Mississippi State University. He is the author of *Common Ground* (2015) and *Howard Thurman's Philosophical Mysticism: Love Against Fragmentation* (2019) and is a member of SAAP's Board of Directors.

<http://www.anthonysneal.com>

### **What does American philosophy mean to you?**

The best way that I can find to describe my meaning of American philosophy, a question to which I understand as extending beyond any traditional definitions one might offer, is to rely upon a question put forward by Howard Thurman, "How can I believe life has meaning if I don't believe my own life has meaning?" A great part of the Black Experience in America has been about struggle. Any philosophizing which arises from this experience must be made to account for this struggle. The object of this struggle has taken on many forms, from physical freedom to the ability to read and write.

Thurman saw free-mindedness as necessary to oppose oppression. Free-mindedness here should be understood as individual control over one's own thoughts, as in the freedom of speech. At a fundamental level it is demonstrated in the ability to say yes or no and have a meaningful silence. For Thurman, this ability was fundamental to freedom.

I often undergird this question with the answer put forward by W.E.B. DuBois when he spoke about the idea of having a double-consciousness saying, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." While DuBois answer is not my answer, in light of these two statements, I take American philosophy to mean something like coming to terms with the Black experience in America in light of American ideals.

### **How did you become an American philosopher?**

I received my early training in philosophy as a student at Morehouse College, training I would describe as being pluralist in nature. I was a Religion major with a Philosophy minor with intentions to serve full-time as a Navy Chaplain. I was even commissioned during my last semester at Morehouse. However, while there I was required to take a Philosophy of Religion course which was only offered at Morehouse in the Spring. I was graduating in the Fall, so I enrolled in the course at ITC (Interdenominational Theological Center), which is also located in the Atlanta University Center, along with Morehouse College. The class

was taught by the late Dr. Edward Smith. He was a Process thinker, having trained with David Ray Griffin. This was my first introduction to what some might traditionally call American Philosophy. He became one of my mentors and I took three more classes with him, two directed studies and one seminar, while doing graduate work at Clark Atlanta University, also located in the Atlanta University Center.

Before beginning my doctoral studies proper, I earned a master of divinity degree from Mercer University. It was at Mercer that I was presented with what might be rightly called the fundamental readings in the philosophy of religion. One of my professors, Graham Walker, had also been immersed in the phenomenological/hermeneutic tradition.

Ironically, because of the training I received in this tradition, I came across Richard Rorty. From that time forward, I have taken Rorty on as a sparring partner of sort. A young Ph.D., Rouslan Elistratov, came to Mercer for the summer who had written a dissertation on Whitehead. He taught only one class, "Whitehead and Process Thought." Of course, I enrolled. Also, while at Mercer, I was a dual-enrolled student at Clark Atlanta University, in the Political Science department. It was then that I began to study with the Political Philosopher/Theorist, Fragano Ledgister, a British Jamaican man who simply read everything. He instantly became another mentor from whom I took 12 hours of coursework and he served on my dissertation committee. I read everything with him from Plato to Dewey. From him, I learned to love the canon. But being at CAU, canon also meant reading Black thinkers as well. Because of this, Adolph Reed, who also studied at CAU, ranks high on my reading list. I also did work in the Humanities and African American Studies departments. My focus was on the humanist tradition, critical theory, and social movements.

### **How would you describe your current research?**

I would characterize my work today as thoroughly focused on philosophy and the Black experience.

Some of my work is in recovery of ideas from overlooked Black American thinkers particularly in what I call the "Modern Era of the African American Freedom Struggle," while other parts of my work attempt to disrupt problematic themes I find in religious and political thought, amid other areas. I have never really gone beyond three main questions: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be free?

### **What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?**

When I am not writing about philosophical reflections, I spend a lot of time thinking while at my cabin in Northeast Mississippi. There I have 1-bedroom cabin in the middle of 10 acres. The land was given to me by my in-laws and it probably saved my life and career. It gave me a place of retreat. Sometimes we, particularly Black people, can be too caught

up in the now and I find that I need time plus space to just be. The weight of being anything beyond that, sometimes wears me down!

I think this is because of my childhood having grown up in a small subdivision with only two streets on the outskirts of Vicksburg, Mississippi. I could run through the woods with my BB gun and be king of the world. I could yell as loud as I wanted to, because there was literally no one around. I moved to Atlanta in high school, but I never lost the urge to just be. Sometimes even now I get on my tractor, while bush-hogging and sing as loud as I can. No one cares or at least they haven't said so. It is the closest description of freedom that I know.

### What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

There are some works that I find to be important to me and then some that I find to be important for the future of the tradition. The works that I find to be important to me are:

- Howard Thurman: *The Search for Common Ground*
- Martin Luther King: *Where Do We Go from Here*
- W.E.B. Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*
- William R. Jones: *Is God a White Racist?*
- Alfred North Whitehead: *The Function of Reason*
- Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*
- William James: *A Pluralistic Universe* and *The Meaning of Truth*
- John Dewey: *The Public and Its Problems*

The works that are important for the future of the tradition are:

- Lee McBride (ed.): *A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader*
- John McClendon III & Stephen Ferguson II: *African American Philosophers and Philosophy*
- Tommy Curry: *Another white Man's Burden*
- Shannon Sullivan (ed.): *Thinking the US South*
- Elvira Basevich: *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Lost and the Found*
- John McClendon III: *Philosophy of Religion and African American Experience*

