

“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

—An Interview Series with John Capps—

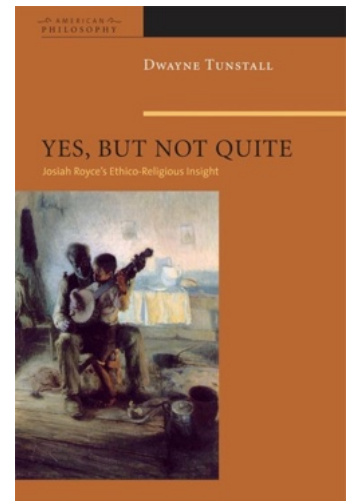


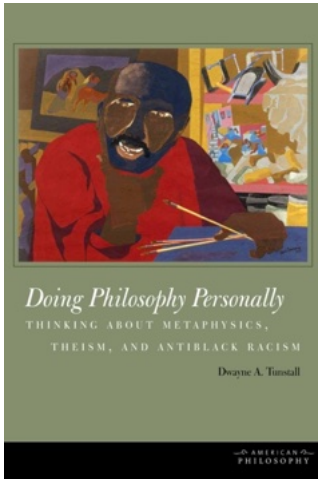
DWAYNE TUNSTALL is Professor of Philosophy and Associate Dean for Inclusive Excellence and Curriculum in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Grand Valley State University. He is the author of *Yes, But Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-Religious Insight* (Fordham University Press, 2009) and *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiracism* (Fordham University Press, 2013). He is a past SAAP Secretary, past President of the Josiah Royce Society, and former Executive Director of Philosophy Born of Struggle.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

American philosophy means many different things to me. I sometimes think about American philosophy as a collection of philosophical traditions that were begun by classical American philosophers such as Borden Parker Bowne, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, George Santayana and then further developed by subsequent generations of philosophers. Other times, I think about American philosophy more broadly as a philosophical orientation that arises from philosophical investigations of the geopolitical, social, cultural, and historical realities of people living in the United States of America. Occasionally, I think of “American” more broadly still to include all the Americas. *American philosophy* becomes *Inter-American philosophy*, the philosophical investigations of the geopolitical, social, cultural, and historical realities of people living in various regions of the Americas, as well as throughout the Americas.

For the last decade, I have preferred to think about American philosophy as a group of philosophical traditions and thinkers who challenge what Erin McKenna and Scott Pratt call the “dominant American logic” in *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present*. American philosophy, in this sense, is a philosophical orientation that offers us ways of being American that do not collapse to either assimilating into the dominant American society and culture, on the one hand, or being excluded from it, on the other hand.



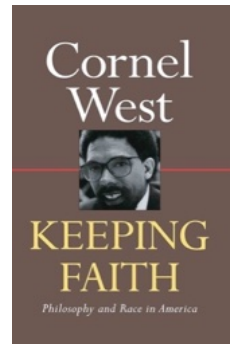


How did you become an American philosopher?

I became an American philosopher through my exposure to American philosophy as an undergraduate student at Christopher Newport University. I took a survey course on American philosophy with my first philosophy mentor, Richard Beauchamp. Richard recommended that I continue my studies in American philosophy at the graduate level. I took his advice and studied several canonical American philosophers as a graduate student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale in the early 2000s. However, I was exposed to American philosophy prior to undergrad. I read Cornel West's *Keeping Faith* as a high school student. That led to my over 30-year interest in American philosophy.

How would you describe your current research?

I finished a research project several months ago. It involved writing a chapter-length evaluation of two lectures from Alain Locke's 1915–1916 lecture series on race contacts and interracial relations for a critical edition of *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*. In it, I contend that Locke's strategy in Lectures 3–4 of *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations* can be understood as an early instance of his critical pragmatism in action. More specifically, I contend that his scientific account of race relations is his means of disrupting and displacing conceptions of race that were harmful to African Americans in the United States and to other subordinated racial groups during the early twentieth century. His efforts to disrupt and displace racial dogmas masquerading as scientific truths could be understood as clearing the intellectual space for a vindication of African Americans in the United States. Tamara Rose Haywood offers a good account of this in her dissertation, *The Racial Vindication Project of Alain Locke*. I consider my contribution to the critical edition of Locke's *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations* as partly building on Haywood's work.



I have a book project that I have been working on periodically for the last decade or so. A large part of the book is an attempt to make sense of what it means to be Black in the United States during the early twenty-first century using intellectual resources from the early twentieth century. This book idea emerged out of two ongoing projects of mine. The first project involves me revisiting works of philosophers from previous historical eras to unearth and revive some of the worthwhile insights present in them, as well as exploring the philosophical implications of racial identity formation and anti-Black racism in a North American and global context. The second project involves the exploration of the philosophical implications of racial identity formation and anti-Black racism in a North American and global context.

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

I read numerous non-fiction books, newspapers, magazines, manga, Substack posts, and the like on whatever topics grab my attention. Lately, I have been reading a lot about how AI, specifically how AI will shape higher education. I listen to music (recently Chance the Rapper, Tyler the Creator, Kendrick Lamar, the *Wicked* soundtrack, among others) and podcasts (such as Ross Douthat, Lurie Daniel Favors, Danielle Moodie) and watch anime, videos, and films (most recently, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *Sinners*, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, and *One Battle After Another*). I occasionally write poetry. These are the ways I feed my imagination and get inspiration to perform my work as an educator and higher education administrator.

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

I don't think in terms of having one favorite work in American philosophy. I am more comfortable thinking in terms of what I find worthwhile with respect to the various interests I have or problems I want to solve. With respect to religion, for example, I think that Wayne Proudfoot's 1985 book, *Religious Experience*, is an excellent pragmatist approach to the study of religion. I also think that Josiah Royce's *The Sources of Religious Insight* is a masterful study of religion in a pragmatist spirit. It may not be as philosophically rich as *The Problem of Christianity*, but it has valuable insights into the nature of religion. It is also an enjoyable read.

There are plenty of books and articles I could say we all should be reading. I will limit myself to three: (1) Leonard Harris's 2018 essay, "Necro-Being: An Actuarial Account of Racism," (2) Derrick Darby's *A Realistic Blacktopia: Why We Must Unite to Fight*, and (3) Nathalie Etoke's *Shades of Black*. I think everyone should be aware of Harris's actuarial account of racism because it is a compelling one. Darby's book offers us a realistic way to pursue a more inclusive democracy in our present reality—one in which a large percentage of residents in the United States are not persuaded by appeals to lessen (much less eliminate) racial disparities in infant mortality rates, income, wealth, and incarceration rates, among other things. Etoke's *Shades of Black* is a poetic and insightful exploration of contemporary Black identities in the United States from the perspective of someone who is a Black existentialist thinker.

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