

COLLEGE GUILD
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PHILOSOPHY

Unit 4 of 6

Who's Who in Philosophy

So far in our units we have mentioned a number of philosophers in relation to the theories they had put forward. Perhaps you've become aware that one thing these philosophers have in common is that they are the "dead white guys" of Western philosophy. Let's consider other important thinkers outside "mainstream philosophy".

Please note that some of the writing might seem quite "scholarly". This is a good time to remind you to take your time in reading, thinking, and crafting your answers.

PART 1 - PHILOSOPHERS OF COLOR

Growing, but still small in number, African American, Latin American, and Native American philosophers write from their own experiences. They think through specific existential, philosophical, and professional problems they face as minority voices. From deeply personal explorations of their lived experience in the midst of hegemonic* practices of North American philosophy, these philosophers help us envision a more inclusive and integrated philosophical field. Philosophers of color have extremely important contributions to make toward philosophical thinking and American culture. (*Hegemonic comes from "hegemony" which means the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group.)

1. What would you consider to be the "dominant group" in American culture?

Viola Cordova (1937 – 2002) was the first Native American woman (Jicarilla Apache) to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy. Even as she became an expert on traditional Western philosophy, she devoted herself to defining a Native American philosophy. In one aspect of her work, she evaluates Christian duality (the split between spirit and substance) underpinning European thought since the mid-1600's. Cordova believed all philosophies and religions receive their acceptance from the point of view of the dominant culture, i.e. White North American, which itself derives from the European points of view. She studied and wrote about how the dominant culture defines other cultures, peoples, languages, intellect, art and spirituality. It is the benchmark by which all indigenous peoples on the planet are judged.

"I ... decided to study white people," she said. "I wanted to be a 'White Expert'. Survival required that I know the enemy."

2. How do you think a minority philosopher becomes a "White Expert"?

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868 – 1963) was one of the most influential intellectuals of the 20th century. The first African-American Ph.D. from Harvard University, Du Bois co-founded the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as well as a number of other influential books that impacted the development of African-American culture in the twentieth century.

Du Bois had a concept of “double consciousness”, 1) one consciousness of what we do based on how we see ourselves, and 2) another consciousness of how other people see us. Du Bois thought that it was particularly difficult for African-Americans to reconcile these two. He argued that racial groups are created through history and culture, and he wanted a world of diverse peoples who had their own histories and shared them with everyone. Here are some statements by Du Bois on his concept of double consciousness:

- *“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.”*
- *“One ever feels (one's) twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”*

3. Regardless of your race or ethnicity or gender, do you ever feel “twoness”, for example weighing who you are as a person vs. who you are as a prisoner? If so, explain.

4. What other “selves”, if any, do you feel?

Lewis Ricardo Gordon (born 1962) is a Black American philosopher who works in the areas of Africana philosophy, philosophy of human and life sciences, philosophy of existence, social and political theory, postcolonial thought, theories of race and racism, philosophies of liberation, aesthetics, philosophy of education, and philosophy of religion. He has written particularly extensively on race and racism, Africana and black existentialism, and on the works and thought of the black philosophers W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon (1925 – 1961).

Africana philosophy is the term that has been coined to account for the philosophical contributions of the people of African descent both in the African homeland and the Diaspora. (Diaspora is defined as: “the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland”.) Some questions explored are: What are the foundations of Africana philosophical thought? Who are the pioneers of Africana philosophical thought? What issues motivate Africana philosophical thought? How are those issues addressed and/or resolved? What role does the question of race and identity play in the philosophical practice of Africana people? How about values?

Gordon writes: *“Our first observation is that racism is a form of dehumanization, and that dehumanization is a form of bad faith—for to deny the humanity of a human being requires lying to ourselves about something of which we are aware.”*

5. Give examples of dehumanization:

- a) between men and women**
- b) between people and animals**
- c) in war**
- d) prison life**
- e) between races**

6. What do you think Gordon means by: “... to deny the humanity of a human being requires lying to ourselves about something of which we are aware.”? Write about your opinion of this statement.

Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651 – 1695) While women in colonial era Mexico were officially prevented from obtaining public recognition for their intellectual knowledge, Sor Juana's intellect was well known because of her prolific writings. In colonial Mexico, becoming a nun was one of the few options for a woman whose ultimate desire was to further a love for learning. Her choice proved favorable for many years. Since women were not allowed to attend the university, the solitude of the nunnery afforded her the space to dedicate to the task of developing her intellectual interests. In this space, Sor Juana revealed her brilliance through her writings encompassing varied themes of mythology, religion, nature, and women's rights. Sor Juana lived in an era where scientific understanding was squelched by religious traditions and long-held superstitions. If she had lived in a time and place where women were given equal rights to education and careers, might Sor Juana have been a scientist?

Sor Juana's lifelong curiosity became the sustenance that nourished her inquisitive mind, the power of her rhetoric (the art of speaking/writing effectively), and the basics of her logic. Sor Juana made the following claims for women's God-given right to knowledge. She argues that without knowledge, how was a woman to understand theology?

“Without Logic, how should I know the general and specific methods by which Holy Scripture is written? Without Rhetoric, how should I understand its figures of speech...? Or how, without...Natural Science, understand all the questions that naturally arise concerning the varied natures of those animals offered as sacrifice...How without Arithmetic might one understand all those mysterious reckonings of years and days and months and hours and weeks...which can be comprehended only by knowing the natures, concordances, and properties of numbers?”* (*Rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing effectively.)

7. If you are a person with a love for learning, what opportunities (other than College Guild) are there for prisoners to study and learn?

Jorge J. E. Gracia (born 1942 in Cuba) is a philosopher with areas of specialization in metaphysics, ethnicity/race/nationality issues, medieval philosophy and Hispanic/Latino/Latin- American Philosophy. Much of his recent work has focused on issues of race, ethnicity and identity. It is within this area that Gracia proposed his “common-bundle view of race” (in other words, races as a type of family). These views of race and ethnicity have helped to shape the field and addressed many issues that previous theories had left unanswered.

“The difficulties raised by social identities are many, complex and confusing. They have at least two sources: first, the very notion that there are overall and general social identities for groups at all; the second, the fact that this kind of identity seems to dissolve into many other, more particular, identities. We are Latinos, but some of us are also Puerto Rican or Mexican. Can we make sense of this? Can we talk meaningfully about a Latino identity and Latino identities? These questions take on added significance when the social and political implications of the use of social identity labels are considered.”

8. If “prisoner” is a social identity, according to Gracia's theory what would be...

- a) an overall social identity of prisoners (i.e. how society might view prisoners)?
- b) specific identity of prisoners (i.e. how prisoners identify themselves and each other).?

9. If you could learn more about these areas of philosophy, which would you choose: Africana, Latino/a, or Native American and why?
10. What other racial or ethnic areas of philosophical study do you think might exist?

PART 2 – WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS



It is astounding to learn that women philosophers have been in existence for 1,500 years! Why have they not been in traditional philosophy textbooks? It is as late as the 1980s that women philosophers have been brought to history's forefront. Here are a few of many...

Hypatia (370 CE – 415 CE) was a Greek philosopher in Alexandria, Egypt who was the first historically noted woman in mathematics. As head of the Platonist (based on the philosophy of Plato) school at Alexandria, she also taught philosophy and astronomy. Throughout her childhood, she was immersed in an environment of thought by her father. Hypatia's prominence was emphasized by the fact that she was both female and pagan in an increasingly Christian environment. In the early 390's, riots broke out frequently between the different religions. In 415, on Hypatia's way home, a mob attacked her, stripped her, killed her with pieces of broken pottery, and then dragged her body through the streets. Hypatia's life ended tragically; however, her life's work remained. Later, Rene Descartes (1496 – 1650), Isaac Newton (1642 – 1727), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646 – 1716) expanded on her work. Hypatia made extraordinary accomplishments for a woman in her time.

“Life is an unfoldment, and the further we travel the more truth we can comprehend. To understand the things that are at our door is the best preparation for understanding those that lie beyond.”

11. What do you think is meant by Hypatia's statement, *“To understand the things that are at our door is the best preparation for understanding those that lie beyond”*? Give an example of this.

Christine de Pizan (1363 – 1434), was an Italian-born writer whose book, *The City of Ladies*, is considered the first publication in Europe by a professional female writer. Pizan was married at age 15 to a court notary who encouraged her to learn to read beyond the bare minimum required of a woman of her time, leading her to consume vast quantities of philosophical works available to her at court. Pizan challenged misogyny (hatred of women or girls) and stereotypes prevalent in the late medieval culture.

“The man or woman in whom resides greater virtue is the higher; neither the loftiness nor the lowliness of a person lies in

the body according to the sex, but in the perfection of conduct and virtue.”

12. Pizan is saying it doesn't matter if a person is female or male. Instead, what IS most important, according to her?

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) was an eighteenth-century British writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. Wollstonecraft is best known for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She suggests that both men and women should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason. (If her name sounds familiar, it's because her daughter with the same name wrote the novel *Frankenstein*.)

“Women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions which men think it manly to pay to (them), when in fact, men are insultingly supporting their own superiority.”

13. Explain your thoughts on why education is important for anyone.

14. How would you define “reason”? How would you define “rational”?

Iris Murdoch (1919 -1999), best known as an author, was also a philosopher. Murdoch proposes that no ethical tradition has ever been able to create a picture of human beings as they truly are. In the course of her career, this was what she used her writing in philosophy and literature to illustrate: a personal vision of humanity's morality. In her novels, she took on the most profound moral questions that we ordinary, flawed, troubled creatures grapple with: those dealing with the battle between good and evil within ourselves and within society.

“We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality. But given the state of the world, is it wise?”

15. Referring back to the first paragraph on women philosophers, why do you think women philosophers have not been included in traditional philosophical textbooks?

16. Why do you think it's important to study philosophy from thinkers in addition to the “dead, white guys” of Western philosophy?

17. Create a chart similar to the one on the next page. If you are able, review Unit Two on metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Put a check mark (or marks if more than one) where you think the philosophers discussed in today's unit belong. See the example on the next page.

	METAPHYSICS "What is real?"	EPISTEMOLOGY "How is knowledge acquired?"	ETHICS "How shall we live?"
Iris Murdoch			
Mary Wollstonecraft		X	
Christine De Pizan			
Hypatia			
Jorge J.E. Garcia			
Sor Juana			
Louis Ricardo Gordon			
W.E.B. DuBois	X		

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes