

Phenomenology of Black Spirit with Biko Mandela Gray and Ryan J. Johnson

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.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Single Still]

We're reframing the philosophical canon today with Biko Mandela Gray and Ryan J. Johnson. Their new book, *Phenomenology of Black Spirit*, puts major Black thinkers in conversation with the work of the philosopher Hegel.

Biko Mandela Gray: What we wanted to do was ask, "How might we think about Hegel's book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in relation to something called Blackness?" We really wanted to ask, "What might it look like for Blackness to be understood as central to philosophical thinking. What we really wanted to do was kind of reframe Hegel. And also, in doing that kind work, engage with Black studies, and make this profound argument that we both agree with, is that Blackness is central to modernity.

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

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[interview begins]

Christiane: So we're here with the authors of *Phenomenology of Black Spirit*, Biko Mandela Gray.

Biko Mandela Gray: Good to be here. Good to be here.

Christiane: And Ryan J. Johnson.

Ryan J. Johnson: Thanks for having me. This is great.

Christiane: So before we start, I have a little challenge for both of you, or either of you. I need you to explain phenomenology to me in three minutes or less. Go!

Ryan J. Johnson: There's phenomenology as a tradition, in the 20th century leading most famously to Edmund Husserl, which has to do with an understanding, or an attempt to develop a science of consciousness, as well as to focus on experience, and treat that as legitimate kind of knowledge and a whole tradition that goes from there. Phenomenology in the way we're using it

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has to do with that for sure, but in Hegel's sense, it all has to do with the science of consciousness as self-consciousness developed through history. So it's how self-consciousness came to know itself as self-consciousness. And that's the part of phenomenology that we're engaging most in. Anything to add to that Biko?

Biko Mandela Gray: In the 20th century you have a guy who asked the question, "How can we know anything?" An old Cartesian question, right? How can we have a certainty about anything? And instead of doing the doubt method, Husserl decides he wants to turn to experience. In the 19th century, Hegel's thinking about how consciousness develops over time, and in history.

And so the question is certainly a question of experience, but it's also this sort of question of epistemology and logic. Hegel was trying to understand, "How does a consciousness develop? And then how do we develop into communities of consciousnesses as well?" And so the question is, "How does one think about oneself? And then think about oneself in community, and how does that unfold over time?"

Christiane: I wasn't watching the clock, but I think you did it, I think you did it in less than three minutes. So tell us, what's your project for this book? What is *Phenomenology of Black Spirit* all about?

Ryan J. Johnson: There's, I think, two levels to it. One is the sort of canon correction, or canon transformation, or dealing with the question, "What do we do with the canon?" So I was trained very much in continental philosophy, and Hegel was taught to me as it is often taught in many places, but it was missing a lot. A lot of questions were not addressed. And one of those main questions was race, and particularly Blackness. So one of the issues is thinking about, "What do we do with the canon, given that it's still valuable, and it's still interesting, but it does a lot of harm. It has done a lot of harm, and its exclusions are violent to all sorts of people, not only in the past but carrying into today.

So there's a kind of attempt to read the canon/Hegel through questions that weren't raised, but should have been raised, as well as treating thinkers who've been excluded from that canon, not only as thinkers worthy of being added to the canon. That's not the goal, not just to add to canon, but to see how they've been doing philosophy the whole time. And then to put them in conversation with Hegel, to see how they then add to transform, improve, and whatever happens from that is, we're open to that. But that goal of trying to transform the canon, that's one major goal.

Biko Mandela Gray: We wanted to go to the big text, the one where he lays out things explicitly, and in this grandiose way, and it's an incredibly smart text. And what we wanted to do was ask, "Well, how might we think about Hegel's book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in relation to something called Blackness?" And specifically, I mean, as I said, I mean the wild part about it is that if you look over the course of Black history, you'll end up seeing, in many different places, Black people engaging in Hegel's work, engaging with the dialectic. And in so doing, you see this sort of moment unfold, where Black thinkers are thinking with his work, even though it's

never clear to me that Hegel would have respected them as thinkers. And so in doing this, we wanted to ask, we really wanted to ask, "What might it look like for Blackness to be understood as central to philosophical thinking, in this case *The Phenomenology of Spirit*?"

What we really wanted to do was kind of reframe Hegel. And also, in doing that kind work, engage with Black studies, and make this profound argument that we both agree with, is that Blackness is central to modernity.

Christiane: I loved the whole book, but I want to focus on one chapter, chapter six. So this is the chapter about Martin Luther King Jr. and Ella Baker. And to me, and I know this is a very technical term, it was the most ethics-y of all of the chapters. You're writing about something you call "sacramental work and desire." So help us first understand what that phrase means.

Biko Mandela Gray: I'll think about it from the perspective of someone like Ella Baker, who is in many ways devoting her life to this work.

Christiane Wisehart: And just to make things clear to folks who maybe haven't heard of Ella Baker before, she's an organizer and activist who's working roughly around the same time that Martin Luther King Jr. sort of comes to prominence. Am I getting that right?

Biko Mandela Gray: Yeah, that's right. She's right around... It's that fifties, sixties period, and she's the one who's actually the sort of engine behind SNCC. So the civil rights movement in the fifties and the sixties is broken out into this Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This is King and his boys. But then there's a group of undergraduate students, and students across the country, who are really, really engaged and radicalized. This is people like John Lewis. And so she's the engine behind that kind of engagement.

They're actually contemporaries of each other, and at times, as we say in the book, a little bit, adversaries from time to time, because King is inadvertently getting caught up in the hype that is his name. I think we try to do our best to say that, but Baker keeps reminding everyone, "This is about the work. This is about the work of justice. And the only way that we're going to get that work of justice is to empower everyone, and not simply unify behind a singular leader."

So ultimately, the way I understand, and the way we try to put this forward in the text. One of the big things that's happening at this particular stage in the dialectic is that, ultimately, the subject, or consciousness, or Black spirit as we understand it, goes to work, and goes to work as an act of what Ronald Judy might call *poiēsis*, goes to work as a way of not simply self-affirmation, but a way of devotion to. And devotion's another technical term that we would use later, but goes to work as a way of, essentially, making the world better. And so what you see with King is his attempt to work through these sort of ideals that have been given to him. And so he's doing this under the fundamental conviction that the United States can be better.

The problem, of course, is that he does it, and he gets caught up in his own hype. Not necessarily that he personally does, but he ends up becoming a figure of such great magnitude, that what he was essentially trying to do, in terms of working toward an ideal, essentially turns back, and it turns out that it's ultimately... He becomes sort of at the central point of this work.

Ryan J. Johnson: This chapter is the central chapter in three chapters. So the book is in six parts, first half and second half, and this is then the second part. There's three parts that are under this term, of Hegel's: "unhappy consciousness." And what unhappy consciousness is, is it comes out of a moment right before, at the end of the first part, where self-conscious is split.

With King and Baker, it's, we need to do the work, not to get rid of the self, because the self is that through which the work is done. So it's no longer an attempt to purify or erase the self. Now we need to do the labor and bring about that world. There's no place to return to, there's no purity that is there. We need to do the work so that it comes about.

The problem with King, as Biko just said, is that as you try to work through the self, to get rid of it, to reach that higher form, it gets in the way. That's the more you work, the more recognized you get, the better you feel, that is doing good work feels good and you feel yourself more. And so that interrupts the attempt to reach that higher self. With Ella Baker, it's a different... She's better at it, because she doesn't become the figure that King does. So she's, herself, doesn't get in the way the same way. That's what her name doesn't become as prominent in this process. And the work itself, actually, is more achieved, it's more even effective you might say.

Biko Mandela Gray: That's the shift that happens between King and Baker, right? And then this is something that Ryan and I, I really appreciated us really thinking through this one together, because what goes down is Baker's legacy is not in a bust on/in DC, or it's not in some holiday that essentially turns her into a legend, although she is legendary. It is actually installed in the work of developing other people who can become leaders unto themselves. So she teaches other people how to lead. And in doing that, she's better at this sacramental work, because the work keeps going.

And we see this contemporarily in the Black Lives Matter movement. A leader for a leaderless movement. A movement where you ultimately have, instead of one singular figure dominating the political ideas, dominating the vision. Each chapter, the movement is fractured and it is local, and each local community develops its own leaders. And so you see that operative, and you see that spirit, being the actual spirit that's motivating contemporary racial justice movements.

Christiane Wisheart: So this always happens to me when I talk about phenomenology, which is my—I think I get it, and then I start talking to people about it and my brain breaks again. So when you're saying that they're trying to, is it move through the self or move past the self? Is that something that's a project of phenomenology in general, is this desire to move past one's individual self, and into some greater thing? And in this case, I'm assuming the greater thing would be racial justice in the United States and the world, right?

Ryan J. Johnson: So I think that's one way to think about it, for sure. I wouldn't make the claim about phenomenology more generally, in that sense. So maybe to really pin it down, the self-consciousness, I can just like to define how that is operating for Hegel, and then to think about these different parts. Consciousness has at least two things. There's the self, and there's the object of consciousness. And in self-consciousness, they merge, so that the self is both the object of consciousness and the subject of consciousness.

And that's what this paradoxical structure, how can it be both a subject and object at the same time, is what Hegel finds so interesting in subconsciousness, and what he thinks is grounding the modernity. But the different parts of consciousness, that subject and object, which again are the same. Those are the two parts we're talking about. When it gets to the unhappy consciousness that we see with talking about work and desire with King and Baker, that higher self, that higher part, can be lots of things, for it is racial justice for sure.

And for King, it's also living up to the ideals of the American promise. It's that the way which it's operated amongst the particulars, that amongst the individual situations in American history, has been violent, racist, and all these things. But, he thinks, there's this higher part that we can still raise up to it. We can still live up to these promises. And that's what he desires, that's what he's trying to achieve. And Baker has similar goals, but not the same kind of belief in those American ideals. That's where you might bring in more questions about well racial justice, and of course, gender justice and other forms of social justice.

Biko Mandela Gray: And also, for some of the figures, it is not simply racial justice that they're after, either. So I think about Zora Neale Hurston, for example. Zora Neale Hurston is someone who is, yes, she's interested in this question of justice, but she's also much more interested in the question of self-determination, right? So how do we think about how we move through the world, as both individuals, and individuals in relation to one another? And sometimes that looks like justice for her.

But someone like Zora Neale Hurston, her question is something both bigger and smaller than racial justice. It's about how Black people might come to live, and might come to have a sense of self-determination in the process. So this is the devotion piece we talk about in the chapter, and I believe that precedes this one. And I think Ella Baker's also thinking in these ways too.

So I bring this up just to say I think racial justice is one of those goals, one of those universals. But I also think someone like Baker's thinking about questions of gender, she's thinking about questions of class. King will eventually think about these things as well, but it's also not subsumed under the sort of American mythos of inalienable human rights in the way that King's thinking about it too.

Christiane Wisheart: I could be wrong about this, but I assume that many of the Black thinkers and activists that you're talking about in this book don't necessarily have Hegel and

phenomenology front and center in their brains the whole time. But you write that Martin Luther King, Jr. was hugely influenced by Hegel. So can you help us understand how he was influenced, and why that's important when we're thinking about what Martin Luther King, Jr. is doing with his life and his work?

Ryan J. Johnson: Our friend Stephen Ferguson, who's a great scholar at NC State. He has this awesome chapter called "The Philosopher King," and it's about Martin Luther King. And he did a lot of the work, the archival work, to find out who was his teachers, what were the syllabi, when he was in Boston and training. And that's when he really encountered Hegel.

I think ways in which Hegel becomes really important for King, and when he is in undergrad more so when he is getting his graduate degrees, he's reading a lot of him. And a lot of it is the kind of standard Hegel, that we're not actually as interested in, in some way. We're interested more in the way in which Hegel illuminates how he lived. And then how he lived pushes Hegel on the parts that King himself didn't take up, in his own theory.

Biko Mandela Gray: You all know that Martin Luther King quote, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice," type of thing. I think this is a way of encapsulating precisely what Ryan so powerfully articulated, which is it's this progressive development, I think, for King. And I think Ryan's also right. I was over here laughing as you were talking, because I was like, "We're not interested in that part."

But definitely, I think King himself saw in Hegel, especially after sitting with Ryan, because Ryan did a lot of work on uncovering King's connection to Hegel, and his thinking with Hegel. I think a lot of King's attraction to Hegel was this dynamism, this sort of long thinking in cosmic, and grand terms, and world-historical terms. And thinking about these world-historical terms as moving along a progressive arc of history. I think that's what attracted King to that. And it probably is one thing that philosophically gave him a little hope too.

Ryan J. Johnson: Yeah, just to highlight that King found hope in Hegel, both because of the... I'm glad you brought that up, Biko, the sense of the moral arc, or the sense of providential, and like that. But also because in Hegel, you see unity arising out of conflict. So that how things move in Hegel is through tension, through contradiction, through division, through segregation, through separation, through... And then you see through that kind of unity. So of course if you're fighting segregation, and you're working towards some unity, this is the logic through which that will come about.

Christiane Wisheart: So I want to return to unhappy consciousness, because I feel like I need one more go helping me understand what it is. But then also, help me understand how Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding of unhappy consciousness translates into political action.

Biko Mandela Gray: So I mean, we have to walk through the multiple sort of stages that lead up to unhappy consciousness. We start the text with the lords-bondsmen dialectic. And as we

move through this particular thing, what happens ultimately in, and I'm going to boil this down to very, very, very basic crude parts. What happens between the slave and the master, is essentially that the slave recognizes that the master needs the slave to enact that work, to essentially fulfill the master's desires.

And so the slave starts saying, "Oh, I'm actually... There's something here for me." This is sort of an emergent self-consciousness, right? And as we say in the first chapter, that this ultimately produces a conflict between the master and slave. And it's a fight, ultimately, to the death. My point in all this is, is what we noticed in the phenomenology is that the slave is the one who Hegel sticks with after that dialectical move. It's not actually the master, right? And so he is trying to figure out, "How does a slave's consciousness develop?" Well, first move is stoicism. And essentially this is the slave turning inward. Or the formerly enslaved, in the case of Black people, turning inward, now trying to understand their own inner life, and committing themselves to a certain level of ideals that are pretty much installed or inside of them. Ryan, you can always correct me if I'm making too quick of moves.

Now in the case of Booker T. Washington for example, it is not as effective as it could be. And so then, this produces, internally, a kind of schism, which is the sort of skepticism of Du Bois. And we call this his double consciousness, right? It didn't work. It didn't do the thing that it needed to do. And so now the question ultimately is, you have these divided selves, and in this divided self you have this sort of internal turmoil, where the subject is struggling. And here's where I'm going to transition over to Ryan, because what happens, in terms of unhappy consciousness, is this sort of skepticism is also insufficient and unsatisfactory.

If you look in the second half of the *Phenomenology of Black Spirit*, there's actually a series of profound... Failures is not the right word, but failures is the word that I have, that the folks that we think with are struggling. These aren't happy endings to these stories. Part of this is, that the unhappy consciousness really is unhappy. There is a lack of satisfaction in the process. And I think King is exemplary of this, because he worked so hard. And then, not only is he killed, but the movement that he worked toward, it doesn't die with him, but it falls back significantly.

Ryan J. Johnson: Another way of thinking about the unhappiness is in the dividedness and in the failure (that's a fine word) to overcome that dividedness. So think if you think about in terms of Du Bois, and the skeptic with this divided self, which we translate into a kind of thinking of double consciousness, which is, Du Bois says, "I'm neither African nor American," right? "I'm neither part of this, nor the other. I'm separated."

And so you don't have that home, you might think, that you can return to. And that dividedness leads to lack of self, or questioning of self, or even schizophrenia. "Am I this? Am I that? I'm neither one, nor the other. I'm not simply African, I'm not simply American." And what happens with unhappy consciousness is it raises up one of those, and says, "I'm this one, and I'm going to do what I can to become the one, to unify that one, to become one again." And with Marcus Garvey, it's Africa. You raise up the African, and say, "We're going to be that. We're going to go

to Africa, and leave behind this determination that has been degraded by, when we were stolen here." So it's that attempt to continually reach that higher form, to unify with that.

With King, it's that higher form is not Africa, it's actually these universals, these American ideals, an attempt to achieve those by working out, by overcoming all the individuality, and all the problematic determinations that have been around. You say, "I can't go to a lunch counter with you. But look, we're both American, look, we're both have these ideals, and we can do the work of getting that."

And maybe one way to think about that, and I'll stop here, is think of what non-violent action is. Which is, "here, I will come up to you. I will come up to your hoses, to your dogs, and you'll see my face. And as you might hit me or you might strike me, it'll eventually see that I'm not the determination of this lower form you think I am, that we have some similarity, some ideal humanity, that'll eventually come through. And so you'll strike down your own individuality, and I'll give up mine, and we'll unify in this humanity."

Christiane Wisehart: Thank you both, because that helps so much, and it helps bring to mind something that I really appreciated about your book, is that I think a lot of people maybe think of Martin Luther King, Jr. as like, "He won. He did it. Racism's over. He's such a great person, and he wins." But that's not actually quite what happens. And you sort of illuminate that in your book, in that he was super powerful, super engaging, but in a lot of ways, his individuality got in the way.

And then as both of you said before, when he's assassinated, he sucks a bunch of the air out of the movement with him because he had such a big individual presence. And so then for me, what's so inspiring about the other person in this chapter, Ella Baker, is that she actually does kind of do a better job.. She de-emphasizes and decenters herself as an individual, in order to make working towards racial justice more of a collective thing. You've already helped us understand a little bit who Ella Baker is, but what's her relationship to phenomenology, and Hegel, and this sort of dueling selves thing.

Biko Mandela Gray: I teach an undergraduate course in African American religion, and so I was actually teaching on King. Actually, we ended up on King yesterday, and I was asking the students, not did his life matter, but did his death matter? In him dying, did the death actually matter? And I was pushing with the students, I was trying to tell them, ultimately, when he dies, the movement dies with him, but the country's not particularly mourning him in that moment. He's fighting for the Vietnam War... And people aren't particularly like, "Oh my gosh, this was the worst thing that ever happened." That happens over time.

What actually happens is precisely what you pointed out, which is the movement loses steam. And because of that, we have to ask ourselves how do we think about King and his reception history? And in light of Hegel, this is why. And this is why Ella Baker, you're right, ends up enacting it in probably a more effective way. But it's also why we don't remember her, too, which

is what we talk about in the text. We don't remember her as well, because her whole goal was to work with communities. So while King is organizing along this old school leadership model, "You gotta have one person who's speaking for everybody. This is how things go. You've got to have this sort of representative who's doing this thing," and King becomes the guy. He's charismatic, he can preach. Ella Baker is, she's not a Hegelian, to my knowledge.

I couldn't find anything where I found her reading Hegel's word, or anything like that. I couldn't find that. And so in thinking with Ella Baker, what we were trying to think through was, what happens if the sacramental work actually is effective? What occurs when that goes down? And what you notice is, Ella Baker's not nearly as remembered in history as King is. There is no bust of her in the Capitol. There is no place where people are sitting to her. And yet, she is one of the primary engines of the civil rights movement in general. And that 1963 March on Washington, she's engaging in that work. But it's because she was not, I won't say wholly uninterested. She had a self, we say this, but she's less interested in amplifying herself, than she is in developing herself in relation to other leaders.

And this is actually how we end up getting to the next chapter, the next stage of the dialectic, right? Because people can go completely the other direction, which is what Malcolm X ends up doing, which is losing yourself in all of these other things. Ella Baker doesn't necessarily do that. Ella Baker is still her. She's still doing her thing. She still has a robust sense of self. She takes credit for what she does, but she's not interested in amplifying herself. Or she's not inadvertently getting caught up in that amplification, because her entire ideal is that everyone can be leaders, if you just give people the tools, they will do the work that they need to do.

Ryan J. Johnson: Ella Baker was once asked about her relationship with King, and it was a strained one. And it said something like, "Who was I? I was a woman. I was old. I didn't have a PhD. You don't know me, you don't have my name." And I think if you want a metaphor here, if King, out of his, how history happened, or how it happened to him, could see from the mountaintop, and look down and project from there, and inspire from there. Ella Baker was down on the valley, down the ground, and doing the minutia. So she didn't give the speech everyone knows, the famous speech, but the details of who's on the bus, of making sure that there's gas, making sure that people have place to stay, making sure there's restrooms.

And that means not leading as the face, that means working together. That means collectivity. So her determination wasn't, "I will lead," it was, "We need to work together, we need to collaborate, we need to liberate together, we need to cultivate relationships." And only through personal communal action will the *movement* continue, will the *movement* win. There's so many stories of her going to people's porches, just walking around the South and going to people's porches, spending hours there and figuring out, "What do you need? I'm not going to tell you what you need. I'm going to help you get what you need. What does your community need here?"

And that kind of work is not this mountaintop leading, which, nothing wrong with that, but that's not what she does. And so her work, her sacramental work, is much more with and among people. And you might say that SNCC continued in various ways. King, when he gets killed, if the movement dies, basically, SNCC transforms in very different ways. You see Stokely Carmichael taking over. You see it continuing on beyond just her. Because she would leave a place after she's done, and the movement would then continue. The determination wasn't just, "Follow me," it was helping people become determining of themselves in their community, in collectivity.

Biko Mandela Gray: I mean Ryan, you've got me thinking about, I mean we are on an Examining Ethics podcast, right? So if you think about the Black Panthers, yeah, I mean, you have these sort of charismatic leaders, these folks. But their actual programs are deeply empowering communities, and to the point where the United States robs them, right? Free Breakfast for Kids, and so on, and so on. So I'm thinking that, I just really wanted to echo that piece that you're talking about, that her approach, and I think it is an ethical approach, right? That for her, she has an ethics of collectivity, and love, and care, and community. And King does too, but she grounds the strength of her selfhood in that community, in those relations. "You can tell me what you need, because you have the power to do so, and we can work this out together."

Christiane Wisehart: I just want to clarify for the audience, because we've said the acronym SNCC a couple times, and it stands for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It's just an activist group that was prominent in the 1960s, but as you say, it sort of morphed into other things as time went on. So unfortunately, we're almost out of time. I want to keep talking about this, but I also, I'm just curious as a last question: What brought you both to this work? Why do you care about this?

Ryan J. Johnson: So just the quick story, which is Biko and I met at a conference, and he was presenting this amazing paper on, correct me if I'm wrong, it was "Toni Morrison, Levinas and the Voyeurism of the White Gaze for Black Suffering," things like that.

And I remember sitting at the table, and just looking at this man, and thinking, "I want to think with you. I just want to think with you." I had this idea for the part of the book. And then later on in the evening, after a few drinks and food, I asked him to do it. And he didn't know me. And he's like, "What am I? What?" So eventually we kept talking, and found that it was working, and that we could think together, and it was amazing. What brought us together was the beauty of his mind, really. And I was like, "I just want to walk with you there."

And then as it kept going, then we actually became friends. So we weren't friends, and said, "Do that." We had an idea, philosophical idea, that brought us together, and the attraction to each other's thinking. And especially how, at least for me, I don't speak for you Biko, about how when we got together, there was a different thing than when I think by myself. That's changed me so much. My writing is totally different now. And the concerns I have, and the ways of addressing

them, are very different. Simply because I was at this conference in Dayton, Ohio, that our a weird, awesome friend, Dustin Atlas and I put on, and I saw a man's beautiful mind, and thought, "I want to be there."

Biko Mandela Gray: When we talk about this stuff. It's always sentimental, and it means a lot even to hear you say it again. I would say that what brought me to the work is something very similar. Like Ryan, we're at this weird conference, Dayton, Ohio's in the middle of nowhere, or maybe it was for me, I don't know, but we're in Dayton. And look, it's good. This guy is up here, he's being charismatic and he presents a paper, and I'm eating pancakes in the back. He's talking about philosophy, religion, and God and so on, and so forth. And I'm saying to myself, "This is completely different than the kind of philosophy that I had been trained to do and enact."

And so of course, you're at conference, after conference happens, there's dinner and there's drinks, and so people are loosening up a little bit. He comes and he says, "Hey, I'm doing this thing, and I'm thinking about this thing. I just have some ideas. I was wondering if you'd be interested." And I say to myself, "Look, like I don't Hegel that well. So yeah, of course I'm interested in trying to understand this thinker better. I need to know him much better than I know him now." And so initially, he's actually right, this is an intellectual project that opens up. And then we become friends. And then not only are we becoming friends to the process of writing this book, but I find out that Ryan is influenced by someone who's very important to me as a thinker, George Yancy.

And not just intellectually influenced by George Yancy. Ryan takes George Yancy's encouragements, and pushes to tarry with one's own privilege. He takes those things seriously. And so there were moments where we would be working with each other throughout this text, and he would be like, "Oh," he would help me understand this particular thing. And then yet, I would be sitting there frustrated about something that's going on in the world, and he would be patient. And do those things, not simply as an act of like, "Ooh, I'm the white savior guy," but as an act of tarrying with someone who is making sense of this anti-Black world as we're writing a project on anti-Blackness and philosophy.

And I'll give you a prime example of this. In May 2020, you all know this, George Floyd is killed. And yeah, nah. I was not able to do much for some time. And Ryan was patient and he tarried, and he said, "We'll wait. We'll wait until you're ready." And I think that's the kind of work, that's the kind of relationship that developed out of writing this text. So I think what brought me to this text was, 1) an attempt to understand Hegel. 2) an attempt to expose what I understand to be the anti-Blackness at the heart of philosophical thinking. But also 3) to learn, to continue to think collaboratively, and also to push philosophical thinking further.

We can be better. We absolutely can be better as philosophers, as ethicists. But the truth of the matter is that many of us get caught up in the same old static questions, not thinking about how philosophy could potentially influence and impact the world. And Ryan was invested in that kind

of project. He was invested in trying to say something that was worth saying, and I think that's what brought us together.

And the last thing that I'll say is that this book, even as it is tragic at many moments, and I'll be done after this, this is also a book of profound, not optimism, but hope. Hope is not necessarily teleological either, right? Hope is not like, "Oh, you know where you're headed." Hope is the sort of desire that things might be different, things might be better. And I think this text is our attempt to say, it's been *messed up* for Black people over the course of history. And yet, there are figures throughout the course of history who have learned to carve out lives, not simply for themselves, but for others. Ella Baker being one of them, even King, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, all of these folks finding ways. And so I just say that to say that this is a text of profound hopefulness, even in moments of profound despair.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Cran Ras]

Christiane: If you want to find more about Biko Mandela Gray or Ryan Johnson, download a transcript of the show or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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