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IDEAS AND IDEALS: HONOURING JOYCE MITCHELL COOK

Anita L. Allen

In the twentieth century, most PhD-trained academic philosophers in both the United States and United Kingdom were white men. The first black woman to earn a PhD in Philosophy was Joyce E. Mitchell Cook (1933–2014). A preacher's daughter from a small town in western Pennsylvania, Cook earned a BA from Bryn Mawr College. She went on to earn degrees in Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology from St Hilda's College at Oxford University before earning a PhD in Philosophy from Yale University in 1965. At Yale she served as Managing Editor of the Review of Metaphysics *and was the first woman appointed as a teaching assistant in Philosophy. She taught at Howard University for nearly a decade and held positions in national government service in Washington, DC, before retiring to a life of independent study of the black experience. Although she did not publish much in her lifetime, Cook deserves to be remembered as: first, an academic trailblazer who proved that race and gender are not barriers to excellence in philosophy; second, a public philosopher who broke barriers as a foreign and economic affairs analyst and presidential speech writer; third, among the first philosophical bioethicists of informed consent and experimentation on humans; and, fourth, an analytic philosopher of race, opposing claims that blacks suffer from inherited intellectual inferiority. Cook's achievements can inspire women of all backgrounds*

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who love philosophy to pursue graduate studies and academic careers.

Introduction

I was extremely pleased to have been asked to deliver the inaugural Joyce Mitchell Cook Memorial Lecture at St Hilda's College, Oxford on 26 May 2021. This article is based on that lecture.

In the United States and in the United Kingdom, we celebrate Dr Cook as the first black woman to receive a PhD in the field of philosophy. As I will explain, she should be remembered as a trailblazer for women in philosophy, an engaged public philosopher, an early bioethicist, and among the first analytic philosophers of race.

Cook was awarded a PhD degree in philosophy in 1965 by Yale University, which is one of the most prestigious American universities. At the time, only a few women earned PhDs in philosophy. That a preacher's daughter from the small town of Sharon, Pennsylvania – one of twelve children – was among the first women, and the first black woman, is truly remarkable. Prior to earning an historic PhD, Cook had already received a BA degree from Bryn Mawr College, an academically rigorous private women's college located in an affluent suburb of Philadelphia. Cook was one of only a handful of black students attending the elite college in the 1950s (Ferguson 2020).

For twentieth-century Americans, Cambridge and Oxford Universities were where one went for the ultimate in training in analytically rigorous philosophy. Cook accordingly travelled to the United Kingdom after graduating from Bryn Mawr. According to Anita Avramedes, Southover Manor Trust Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at St Hilda's, Cook's path to Oxford was probably smoothed by Dame Helen Gardner, who was one of St Hilda's most distinguished Fellows. In the 1950s Gardner encouraged educational links between St Hilda's and American institutions,

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including Bryn Mawr. Cook was awarded a second bachelor's degree reading Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology ('PPP') at St Hilda's. While a student there she shared a flat with Elinor Shaffer, who went on to be a distinguished scholar of comparative literature. Cook would later highly praise her attentive mentors at Oxford, who included Mary Warnock, Brian Farrell and Sir Peter Strawson. She would credit them for teaching her how to write and edit exceptionally well.

Indeed, when Cook left Oxford and went to Yale, she was poised for success. Though only a student, a female, and black, she was the first woman invited to teach philosophy, and was appointed managing editor of a leading philosophy journal, the *Review of Metaphysics.* She wrote numerous short book reviews for the journal in 1959 and 1960. Separately, Cook worked at Yale University Press.

Cook must have known that her accomplishments were outstanding and unusual for a black woman. But she recounted that she was not aware of being the very first black woman philosophy PhD until the late 1960s when a colleague on the faculty of Howard University, the famed historically black university in Washington DC, which would later deny her tenure, made the observation.

Meeting Cook

Since Cook was teaching and on the speakers' circuit in the 1970s, you might assume that younger black women studying philosophy and entering graduate school in philosophy at that time learned about her from their instructors. We did not. When I made a decision at the age of twenty in 1974 to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, I knew nothing of Cook and the few other black women philosophers who had come before me – with one exception. I knew of the towering American radical icon of the 1970s, Angela Davis.

Angela Davis was the second black woman after Cook to receive a PhD in philosophy. Her degree was from

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Humboldt University in Berlin. Angela Davis spent her childhood in Alabama. Her parents were leftists who sent her to be educated in the north. Davis attended the liberal Jewish, Brandeis University in Massachusetts, became a communist, and later joined forces with the radical Black Power movement. Her radicalism cost her a job at the University of California Los Angeles. She gained international notoriety as a fugitive from justice, wrongly implicated in assassinations that occurred in a Marin County California courtroom carried out with guns she had purchased. Eventually acquitted of any wrongdoing, Davis flourished in an academic career, teaching and advocating for prison abolition, gender equality and racial justice.

Joyce Mitchell Cook and Angela Davis were near polar opposites. Joyce was mainstream, a moderate who promoted change through the rational deliberation within the existing political system. Her philosophical role models were the Oxford crowd. Ten years younger, Davis was an outspoken radical who looked and sounded the part; she was prepared to see existing structures replaced from the bottom up. Davis's philosophical role models were continental Marxists and the Frankfurt School.

In most respects, Cook would have been an easier role model for me than Davis. Like Cook I came from a more conservative Christian family, and my undergraduate work was heavily analytic and pragmatic. Be that as it may, I first encountered Cook when I was long past my education in philosophy.

I was introduced to Cook by the now Berlin-based philosopher Adrian Piper in the late 1980s. Both among the first five African American women to receive PhDs in philosophy, Piper and I were teaching at Georgetown University and living in Washington. Cook was living in Washington too, as an independent scholar. Piper made an appointment for us to visit Cook at her home.

I vividly remember picking up Piper in a bright little yellow Toyota and zipping to Cook's apartment. Upon excited arrival, Cook struck me as gracious and glad for

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visitors to her modest home. I was amazed by her story – the Yale PhD, the time working as a speech writer for President Jimmy Carter, and the inexplicable failure of Howard University to grant her tenure. I thought it somewhat eccentric that, despite not having a job as an academic, she spent her days at the Library of Congress reading and studying philosophy. I wondered how she supported herself. She didn't discuss anything personal – nothing about her finances, her family, her health, her interesting ex-husband, a physician, Dr Lawrence Cook, Jr. No chit-chat. She was the warmest 'all business' person you could imagine.

After our energizing visit with Dr Cook, Piper approached me with the idea of starting an organization of Black Women Philosophers – 'The Association of African American Women Philosophers'. This would be a support and discussion group. It was a radical idea. Piper felt it was important that our group be kept secret, lest our members face retaliation for calling attention to our experiences of discrimination and disparagement.

We had indeed begun to privately share our horror stories. There was a pattern of tenure denials. Cook was not tenured by Howard. Adrian Piper had been denied tenure by the University of Michigan before being tenured by Georgetown University; Angela Davis had been twice fired by the University of California, and Lavern Shelton had been denied tenure by Rutgers University. Indeed, the first four black women PhDs to be eligible for tenure in a US philosophy department all had an experience of being passed over for tenure, despite being brilliant and having PhDs from top schools – Harvard (Piper), Yale (Cook), Humboldt University (Davis) and the University of Wisconsin (Shelton). I may have been spared the same fate by the fortuity of having decided to go to law school before I came up for tenure in philosophy at Carnegie-Mellon University, where I was the only woman philosopher in my department and probably the only black woman on the tenure track. Astonishingly, until the 1990s Piper was

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the only black woman in the US to earn tenure in a philosophy department. (I was tenured in a law school.)

Piper and I tried to identify and reach out to all of the Black American women with PhDs in philosophy. On our initial list were Joyce Mitchell Cook, Angela Davis, me, Piper, Lavern Shelton (logician), Georgette Sinckler (ancient philosophy specialist) and Michele Moody-Adams (moral philosopher). We tried to arrange meetings of the black women philosophers in Washington in connection with the meetings of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. We could never get more than four of us together at a time and the project was abandoned. There simply wasn't critical mass at any point in the twentieth century.

Cook Gains Recognition

Cook's accomplishments were not widely known until Dr George Yancy (a philosopher now on the faculty of Emory University in Atlanta) published an interview with her in his book *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (1998). The enlightening interview publicized her remarkable story, in her own voice. Like me, Yancy was introduced to Cook by Piper (Yancy 2017).

In 2007, nearly a decade after the Yancy interview Dr Kathryn Sophia Belle (then Gines) organized a support group, the 'Collegium of Black Women Philosophers'. At the group's first meeting, held at Vanderbilt University, Cook was introduced to an adoring community of about twenty black women philosophers and student philosophers as the first black woman philosophy PhD. After the first meeting, the journalistic historian of philosophy, Carlin Romano, detailed the Collegium event in a two-page article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper. Romano later included Cook in a chapter on women philosophers in his book, *America the Philosophical* (2012). The Collegium continues to meet and celebrate the mother of us all, Dr Joyce E. Mitchell Cook.

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Today, Cook's recognition grows. The American Philosophical Association (APA) created an award named in Cook's honour in 2014. The Joyce Mitchell Cook award is designed to be presented biennially by the APA Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers in honour of Cook, recognizing a book written by a black woman philosopher. The Yale Department of Philosophy hosted a conference to honour the life and work of Joyce Mitchell Cook on 4–5 December –2015. George Yancy gave the keynote, and I was among the speakers.

Cook's Legacy as a Philosopher

I want now to talk about the legacy and philosophical work of Joyce Mitchell Cook. What she wrote and said, and what she didn't write and speak.

By the standards of today, Joyce Mitchell Cook was not a highly productive scholar. She published only two scholarly articles. She didn't write a book. Why didn't Cook write more philosophy? She was certainly smart and educated enough.

Based on what Cook said about herself in her interviews with Yancy and what she said to me over the years, she seems to have believed you have to have read and analysed everything relating to a topic before you can start to write about it. And when you do write, you have to be logical and unbiased. This 'read-everything-first' mentality worked against Cook. Indeed, in her 1998 interview with George Yancy she spoke of being 'immersed' if not 'mired' in 'mounds of note cards'. She wanted to write a book on what, decades later, she still referred to in the parlance of the 1960s as 'the black experience', but her research and understanding were never sufficient to allow her complete the project. She wanted to write an autobiography, but that project, too, was stymied by her self-imposed high standards of readiness and perfect timing.

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Cook's legacy is not, therefore, about the volume of her finished academic writings. Cook's legacy resides instead in four main contributions:

(1) being an academic trailblazer in philosophy, demonstrating in a life of accomplishment both the perils and opportunities of being first;
(2) being a publicly engaged philosopher, and demonstrating that a training in philosophy can be useful for high-level employment outside the academy;
(3) being among the first bioethicists concerned about informed consent and human subject research; and finally,
(4) being among the first analytical philosophers of race, demonstrating the value of applying the tools of analytical philosophy to the topic of race and the diverse experiences of Americans of African descent.

I will comment of these points of legacy in turn.

The Trailblazer

In terms of her astonishing academic degrees, Cook was a trailblazer, as I have already described.

One of the difficulties faced by trailblazers is knowing what topics are worth writing about and finding appropriate mentors. In her interview with George Yancy (on page 271) Cook described her PhD thesis topic as 'misguided'. One has to agree that it was not a project calculated to put her in a good place for practical success.

Cook wrote her PhD thesis on the value theory of someone you have probably never heard of, Stephen C. Pepper. Her thesis was called *A Critical Examination of Stephen C. Pepper's Theory of Value*. A professor at the University of California, in 1942 Pepper published a book called *World Hypotheses*. In 1958 Pepper published a

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massive 732-page tome, *The Sources of Value*. In this obscure book, Pepper elaborates an idiosyncratic taxonomy of all the things humans value and why. Pepper sought to defended perspectives influenced by the pragmatist John Dewey. In 1960 Pepper published a book entitled *Ethics*. Cook, whose ethical philosophy was a Kantian deontology, had to master all of Pepper's major writings in order to complete her dissertation.

Cook's thesis on Pepper is very well written, clear and analytical. It proved she can 'do philosophy' exceedingly well, but it was not a thesis calculated to demonstrate her capacity for bold originality or to put her in conversation with people in the academy who would be an ongoing source of collegiality and mentorship. Pepper simply wasn't important enough or widely read enough to warrant her devotion. By the time the thesis was finished, Cook had run through several supervisors and had left Yale to work at the US State Department. Cook's doctoral work helped launch a career in government service, but it did not provide a natural bridge to engaging fellow Black American intellectuals. It is striking that though writing a dissertation in the midst of the civil rights movement, Cook does not allude to the American struggle for racial equality as an example of conflicts or failures of value. There is nothing in Cook's doctoral thesis to signal that she is woman or a black woman.

Or is there? A place in her dissertation where Cook comes to life is in her response to a hypothetical ethical dilemma posed by Pepper in his book *Ethics*. Elaborated throughout Chapter 7 ('Pragmatic or Social Situation Theory'), the hypothetical goes like this. A professor and his wife, a housewife, take in a college student for whom they provide room and board in exchange for household help. The student becomes ill with flu-like symptoms. The wife would like to call a doctor and send the girl by ambulance to stay in the campus infirmary until she is better, so she will not infect the family or become even sicker. But the girl is a member of the Christian Scientist religion,

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opposed to formal medical treatment. Pepper believed the ethical thing for the housewife to do is to successfully 'most fully reduce' the tensions and problems involved in the situation; and that she can do this by letting the girl remain in place in light of her religious beliefs and make sure that any future student they take in agree in advance to medical care in the event that she gets ill. Cook finds completely inadequate Pepper's religious freedom and contract-emphatic analysis of the hypothetical.

Ethics is not, she insists, just about reducing tensions between persons. Good ethics would not require self-sacrifice on the part of the parents, placing themselves and their children at risk of what could be meningitis or another highly dangerous and contagious condition. Moreover, giving in to the girl would not end the wife's inner moral conflict, which is a tension that matters too. Pepper's advice would place the professor and his wife at risk of legal liability for not, *in loco parentis*, seeing to it that the girl, a minor, gets care and that her parents are informed of her predicament. Pepper's assessment required the housewife to back down and sacrifice, but Cook's response assumes that a woman with caretaking responsibilities is nothing less than a full-blooded moral agent in her own right, who lives a life of interconnection implicating social expectations and legal norms alike. The response strikes me as influenced by her being a worldly woman who understands the ethical dimensions of subordinated social roles and status.

The Public Philosopher

Among her legacies Cook was a publicly engaged philosopher. In fact, today someone with her career path would be described as a public philosopher engaged in 'public philosophy'. In the US context today, the term 'public philosophy' is applied to practical activities performed by professionally trained philosophers who directly engage in

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public affairs, facilitated – explicitly or implicitly – by philosophical methods, concepts and theories.

Public philosophy often takes the philosopher far from the walls of academe to work alongside policymakers, activists and others seeking to advance practical goals. Extramural public philosophy in this sense is exemplified by Paul Root Wolpe, who was appointed Senior Bioethicist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). It is also exemplified by William Galston who, before landing at the Brookings Institution, served as Deputy Assistant to President Clinton for Domestic Policy, as well as Executive Director of the National Commission on Civic Renewal.

But before the likes of Wolpe and Galston was Joyce Mitchell Cook. Cook had an academic career, teaching at Wellesley College (1961–2), Connecticut College (1968–70) and Howard University (1966–77). But, extraordinary for a PhD philosopher, Cook worked for the US State Department for a year and a half, as an analyst of events in several African countries. She then worked for the former Office of Economic Opportunity. Cook later worked in the White House as a speech writer and communications analyst for President Jimmy Carter (1977–81). Her intellectual rigour and excellent communication skills helped her succeed in these roles outside the academy.

The Bioethicist

Joyce Mitchell Cook was interested in metaethics and normative ethics, as exemplified by her PhD thesis. But she was also interested in practical, applied ethics and professional ethics. One of Cook's precious few published papers is an early and major contribution to the field of 'bioethics', a field that was born in the 1970s. Cook's paper, entitled 'The Problem of Informed Consent, Focusing on Prisons', was included as an Appendix to a report in 1976 of the National Commission for the Protection of Human

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Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, sponsored by the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare (today, DHHS) (Cook 1976b).

The overall 1976 report focused on the issue of experimentation on human subjects who are confined to prisons. Cook's paper dealt with prisoners, but also with other vulnerable populations, such as institutionalized children with mental disabilities. Some American experts in the field believed that experimentation on institutionalized 'retarded' children was appropriate. One such expert defended the idea of deliberately infecting children entering institutions with hepatitis on the grounds that they would probably get the disease anyway. Cook saw this kind of thinking as dangerous and reminiscent of Nazi thinking. She wrote:

> the argument 'I shall deliberately dose you with hepatitis, because you are going to get it anyway', seems to me to have elided down the slippery slope of the German doctors at Nuremberg who attempted to defend their experiments on . . . the grounds that their subjects/victims were going to die anyway. Shall we allow this sort of rationale to range over the terminally ill, who are going to die anyway, so why not experiment on them? Shall it extend to the public at large – we are all going to die anyway?

In connection with the 'wariness engendered at Auschwitz' she raised the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study experiments on African American men who were deceptively enrolled in research aimed at following the course of deliberately untreated syphilis. As for persons confined in prisons following conviction for crimes, some American experts in the field believed the prison population was a perfect set of subjects for biomedical experimentation, and that subjection to medical experimentation was a morally admirable way for convicted men and women to repay their debt to society. Joyce Cook disagreed, probing deeply into the issue of ethical motives and incentives to discern what

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it means to give truly informed consent. She doubted that incarcerated persons can exercise the agency required by authentic informed consent to placing their bodies and health on the line.

Building on the 1976 report and deliberations, the National Commission published in 1979 the foundational statement of bioethics principles known today as *The Belmont Report*. Joyce's analysis is echoed in the discussion in Part C of the *Belmont Report* of justice in the selection of research subjects:

> One special instance of injustice results from the involvement of vulnerable subjects. Certain groups, such as racial minorities, the economically disadvantaged, the very sick, and the institutionalized may continually be sought as research subjects, owing to their ready availability in settings where research is conducted. Given their dependent status and their frequently compromised capacity for free consent, they should be protected against the danger of being involved in research solely for administrative convenience, or because they are easy to manipulate as a result of their illness or socioeconomic condition.

While there is no way to tell exactly how much Cook influenced the elaboration of the Belmont principles, it is highly significant that her ideas and ideals were incorporated into the work of the Commission.

The Analytic Philosopher of Race

Cook was not what we today call a 'critical race theorist', intent upon exposing the dynamics of power, wealth and racism. She was instead an analytic philosopher of race. She can be compared to my University of Pennsylvania Colleague, Quayshawn Spencer, who uses analytical methods to expose illogic and inconsistencies in race discourse.

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In all of her writings Cook displayed analytical rigour learned at Oxford. In the Wingspread interview she identified logical consistency and clarity as central philosophical values to be pursued with a Jamesian 'persistent, self-critical and stubborn' intellect (Cook 1976a). She always began her philosophical work stressing the importance of defining key terms for the sake of conceptual clarity. She often sought to disambiguate terms, concepts and arguments. She wrote with self-confidence and occasional aggression.

In 1977 Cook published an analytical style paper in a special edition of *Philosophical Forum* devoted to the 'African American Experience'. Cook's paper was called 'On the Nature and Nurture of Intelligence' and dealt with controversies over IQ testing and its implications. In this work Cook drew on her training in psychology – the degree she studied at Oxford was PPP, Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology.

I note that Cook was unimpressed by the obnoxious argument of Nobel prize winning scientist William Shockley, who achieved fame in the early 1970s for declaring that blacks are genetically intellectually inferior to whites, and thus unlikely to benefit greatly from interventions designed to improve their socio-economic environments. Shockley once stated that: 'My research leads me inescapably to the opinion that the major cause of the American Negro's intellectual and social deficits is hereditary and racially genetic in origin and, thus, not remediable to a major degree by practical improvements in the environment.'

Cook was similarly unimpressed by the conclusions of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, a book by psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein and political scientist Charles Murray published in 1994. Herrnstein and Murray argued that human intelligence is substantially influenced by both inherited and environmental factors. Defending the evidence of IQ testing on which Asians outperform whites and whites outperform blacks, they argued that: 'It seems highly likely to us that both genes and environment have something to do with racial differences.'

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I believe Cook would be pleased that the use of standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT as criteria for admissions to American colleges and universities has come under fire. Historically there has been a gap between the test scores of black students and those of white students. The tests do not predict success in college, which depends on drive and resilience and hard work. I think if she were alive today Cook would support the idea of eliminating so-called standardized and objective tests as a criterion for college and university admissions.

Cook's *Philosophical Forum* paper examined the conflicting claims of experts on race and heredity, arguing, with her typical restraint and dispassion, that there was insufficient empirical evidence to support claims of black inferiority. Cook was not persuaded that intelligence is significantly a function of heredity and that blacks, regardless of wealth status, perform more poorly that whites on IQ testing, probably due to innate differences in intelligence. Cook had been the valedictorian of her class in a nearly all-white high school. She would naturally find the IQ-inferiority claims about blacks suspect.

Cook ended the *Philosophical Forum* paper with the sharp and poignant observation that IQ enthusiasts intent upon proving black inferiority have not cared to chronicle the genius of black men and women. Everyone knows that John Stuart Mill was a genius with a likely IQ of 190, Cook explained. But, she asks, who has bothered about the intelligence of countless black geniuses who achieved greatness despite hunger, cultural malnutrition and an unfriendly land? What about George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington or Mary McLeod Bethune? 'Requiescat in pace', she concluded. Rest in peace.

Conclusion

Cook shared her ideas and ideals about philosophy in a radio interview on 'The Black Philosopher' that she gave

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from the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin when she was a professor at Howard University. Also interviewed on the programme were William Jones, a Yale Divinity School professor and Robert Williams, a Vanderbilt University philosopher. In response to questions about why there are so few blacks in philosophy, the trio pointed to issues of opportunity and the attractiveness of more lucrative professions. But Cook also remarked that 'an interest in truth made me go into philosophy'. There is only one reason to choose philosophy, she said – and it is not to make money or to achieve status – it is because 'your life is unthinkable without it'.

We celebrate Joyce Mitchell Cook in order to celebrate the idea that the love of philosophy knows no boundaries of race, class or gender. There's no demographic limitation on who can fall in love with philosophy and or who can excel in the discipline.

Cook once said that she felt she had been born too soon. To be sure, her ability to flourish as a professionally employed philosopher would have been so much greater if she had gained her PhD just fifteen years later, in 1980 when Adrian Piper and I did, rather than 1965.

The opportunity for like-minded collegial exchange, for publication and for recognition for women of colour continues to grow. I so wish Dr Cook could have lived long enough to see me elected in 2018 as the first black woman President of the American Philosophical Association! To finally see a black woman's name on a list that began with John Dewey would have meant a lot to her, I know.

So, in a sense Dr Cook *was* born too soon. Yet, I like to think that she was born at exactly the right time. She was born just in time to quietly exploit the gains of the post-Second World War civil rights movement and the women's rights movement and to break down barriers of race and gender.

Climbers often rely on someone else to affix safety ropes to the slopes, enabling them to scale a high mountain. Someone extraordinary was needed to fix the ropes so that others could scale the highest peaks of philosophy. That

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extraordinary person was Dr Joyce Mitchell Cook, who prepared the way with brilliance and with grace.

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